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A CABINET SECRET

GUY BOOTHBY

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DAVID STAFFORD

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A Cabinet Secret

SHE STOOPED OVER ME.

'A CABINET SECRET.' *Page* 118.
(Frontispiece.)

A Cabinet Secret

By Guy Boothby

Author of "Dr Nikola," "The Beautiful White Devil," "Pharos the Egyptian," "A Sailor's Bride," etc., etc.

With Illustrations by A. Wallis Mills

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INTRODUCTION

The Author deems it right to preface his work with the remark, that while the War between England and the South African Republics forms the basis of the story, the characters and incidents therein described are purely fictional, and have no sort of resemblance, either intended or implied, with living people. The Author's only desire is to show what, under certain, doubtless improbable, conditions, might very well have happened, had a secret power endeavoured to harass the Empire by taking advantage of her temporary difficulties.

A Cabinet Secret

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INTRODUCTION

NIGHT was falling, and Naples Harbour, always picturesque, appeared even more so than usual in the warm light of the departing day. The city itself, climbing up the hillside, almost from the water's edge, was coloured a pale pink by the sunset, and even old Vesuvius, from whose top a thin column of black smoke was issuing, seemed somewhat less sombre than usual. Out Ischiawards, the heavens were a mass of gold and crimson colouring, and this was reflected in the calm waters of the Bay, till the whole world was a veritable glow. Taken altogether, a more beautiful evening could scarcely have been desired. And yet it is not with the city, the mountain, or the sunset, that we have to do,

but with the first movement of a conspiracy that was destined ultimately to shake one of the greatest Empires, the earth has ever seen, to the very foundations of its being.

Though the world was not aware of it, and would not, in all human probability, have concerned itself very much about it even if it had, the fact remains that for some hours past two men, from a house situated on one of the loftiest pinnacles of the city, had been concentrating their attention, by means of powerful glasses, upon the harbour, closely scrutinizing every vessel that entered and dropped her anchor inside the Mole.

"Can anything have happened that she does not come?" asked the taller of the pair, as he put down his glasses, and began to pace the room. "The cable said most distinctly that the steam yacht, *Princess Badroulbadour* passed through the Straits of Messina yesterday at seven o'clock. Surely they should be here by this time?"

"One would have thought so," his companion replied. "It must be borne in mind, however, that the *Princess* is a private yacht, and it is more likely, as the wind is fair, that the owner is sailing in order to save his fuel."

"To the devil with him, then, for his English meanness," answered the other angrily. "He does not know how anxious we are to see her."

"And, everything taken into consideration, it is just as well for us and for the safety of his passengers that he does not," his friend retorted. "If he did, his first act after he dropped anchor would be to hand them over to the tender mercies of the Police. In that case we should be ruined for ever and a day. Perhaps that aspect of the affair has not struck you?"

"It is evident that you take me for a fool," the other answered angrily. "Of course, I know all that; but it does not make me any the less anxious to see them. Consider for a moment what we have at stake. Never before has there been such a chance of bringing to her knees one of the proudest nations of the earth. And to think that if that vessel does not put in an appearance within the next few hours, all our preparations may be in vain!"

"She will be here in good time, never fear," his companion replied soothingly. "She has never disappointed us yet."

"Not willingly, I will admit," the other returned; "but in this matter she may not

be her own mistress. She is a beautiful woman, and for all we know to the contrary, this English *milord* may be prolonging the voyage in order to enjoy her society. Who knows but that he may carry her off altogether?"

"In that case his country should erect a memorial to him, similar to the Nelson Monument," said the smaller man. "For it is certain he will have rendered her as great a service as that empty-sleeved Hero ever did."

The other did not reply, but, after another impatient glance at the Harbour, once more began to pace the room. He was a tall, handsome fellow, little more than thirty years of age, and carried himself with soldierly erectness. The most casual observer would have noticed that he was irreproachably dressed, and that his manners were those of one accustomed to good society. His companion, on the other hand, was short and stout, with a round bullet head, and closely cropped hair. He was also the possessor of a pair of small twinkling eyes, and a neck so thick, that one instinctively thought of apoplexy and sudden death in connection with its owner. The room they occupied was strangely at variance with the

appearance of the younger and taller man. It was little more than a garret, very dirty, and furnished in the poorest fashion. But it had one advantage: it commanded a splendid view of Naples Harbour, and, after all, that was what its present occupants required. At last, the younger man, tired of his sentry-go up and down the room, threw himself into a chair and lit a cigarette. For some minutes not a word passed between them; all the time, however, the shorter man remained at the window, his glass turned seaward, watching for the smallest sign of the vessel they were so eagerly expecting. Suddenly he uttered an exclamation which caused the other to spring to his feet.

"What is it?" cried the latter; "what do you see?"

"I fancy she is coming up now," his friend replied. "If you run your glass along the sky-line, I fancy you will be able to detect a white speck, with a tiny column of smoke above it."

The other followed the directions given him, and, after a careful scrutiny, gave it as his opinion that what his companion had said was correct. Nearly an hour elapsed, however, before they could be quite certain upon the

subject. At last the matter was settled beyond doubt, and when a magnificent white yacht rounded the Mole and came to its anchorage in the Mercantile Harbour, they prepared to make their way down to the water-side in order to board her. Before they started, however, the elder of the two men effected sundry changes in his attire.

"Forgive the mummery," he remarked, as he took a somewhat clerical hat and cloak from a peg, "but, as they say upon the stage, 'the unities must be observed.' If our beautiful Countess has played her cards carefully, Monseigneur should be of great benefit to us hereafter. It would be a thousand pities to scare him away at the beginning. For this reason it will be as well for you to remember that I am her Excellency's lawyer, who has hastened to Naples in order to confer with her on a matter of considerable importance, connected with her Styrian estates. No suspicion will then be excited."

By the time he had finished speaking he had donned the hat and cloak, and when he had given another expression to his face—for the man was a consummate actor—he was satisfied that he looked the part he was about to play. After that they descended the narrow,

rickety stairs together, and passed out into the street. It was a warm afternoon, and in consequence Naples was in her most unsavoury humour. The two men, however, did not appear to trouble themselves very much about it. Side by side they made their way through the crowded streets, almost in silence. Each was thinking of the approaching interview, and of what was to result from it. Reaching the Harbour, they chartered a boat and bade the rower convey them to the white yacht which had just dropped her anchor. The man obeyed, and in less than five minutes they were lying alongside one of the most beautiful pleasure vessels that has ever upheld the shipbuilding honour of the Clyde. The Port formalities had already been complied with, and now the accommodation ladder was hanging at the side in readiness for visitors. When they drew up at its foot, the tall man, addressing the quartermaster on duty at the gangway, enquired whether Madame la Comtesse de Venetza were aboard, and, if so, whether she would permit visitors to pay their respects to her.

It was noticeable that he spoke excellent English, with scarcely a touch of foreign accent.

The man departed with the message, to

presently return with the report that Madame would be pleased to see the gentleman if they would "come aboard." They accordingly climbed the ladder, and followed the quartermaster along the deck to a sumptuous saloon under the bridge. The owner of the beautiful craft was in the act of leaving the cabin as they approached it.

"Won't you come in?" he said, pausing to open the door for them. "The Countess will be very pleased to see you."

As he said this he glanced sharply at the two men, with an Englishman's innate distrust of foreigners. He saw little in them, however, to criticise, and nothing to dislike. They, on their side, found him a tall, stalwart Englishman of the typical standard—blue eyes, ruddy cheeks, close cropped hair, the latter a little inclined to be curly, well, but not over dressed, and carrying with him an air of latent strength that, in spite of his good-humoured expression, would have made most people chary of offending him. When the two men entered the cabin, he closed the door behind them and ran lightly up the ladder to the bridge.

After his departure there was a momentary, but somewhat embarrassing, silence. A

long shaft of sunlight streamed in through one of the windows (for they resembled windows more than port-holes) and revealed the fact that the lady, who was reclining in a long easy-chair, was extremely beautiful. Despite the cordial message she had sent, her visitors could scarcely have been welcome, for she did not even take the trouble to rise to receive them, but allowed a tall grey-haired man, who might very well have passed for her father, to do the honours for her.

"My dear Luigi—my dear Conrad," he said, offering his right hand to the smaller of the two men and his left to the other. "It is indeed kind of you to be so quick to welcome us. The Countess is a little tired this afternoon, but she is none the less delighted to see you."

The scornful curl of the lady's lips not only belied this assertion, but indicated that *miladi* was in a by no means pleasant temper. The impatient movement of the little foot, peeping from beneath her dress, said as much, as plainly as any words could speak.

"We have been waiting for you all day," the younger man began. "There is news of the greatest importance to communicate. Every hour that passes is now so much time wasted."

Then, for the first time during the interview, the lady spoke.

"You infer that I might have been quicker?" she said, with a touch of scorn in her voice. "You evidently forget that, had it not been for this English *milord's* kindness, I should not be here even now."

It looked as if the younger man, while really uncomfortable, were trying to act as if he were not afraid of her.

"Is there not such a thing as the Oriental Express?" he asked. "Had you used that, we might have met at Turin, and have saved a great deal of trouble and valuable time."

The lady turned impatiently from him to his companion.

"What form does your news take?" she enquired. "Is it contained in a letter?"

"No, *Excellenza*, it was to be delivered by word of mouth," the other replied. "The Council, who were in Prague at the time, paid me the compliment of trusting to my discretion, and despatched me immediately to you. We heard that you were in Constantinople, and the Secretary undertook to have a message transmitted to you there. Our friend, Conrad here, is perhaps not aware that the Oriental Express is occasionally

an impossible medium. But, while condoling with you on that score, I must congratulate your Excellency in having pressed the Duke of Rotherhithe into your service."

"Pray spare yourself the trouble," the lady replied. "I do not know that I am particularly fond of obtaining hospitality, such as his, under false pretences. It is sufficient for your purposes, is it not, that I am here, and ready to do the Council's bidding, whatever that may be. Perhaps you will be good enough to tell me what is expected of me?"

"Is it safe for me to tell you here?" Luigi enquired, and as he said it he looked anxiously about him, as if he feared the presence of eavesdroppers.

"As safe as it will be anywhere," the lady answered. "It is an Englishman's yacht, and, whatever we may say of them, they are not in the habit of listening at keyholes. Now what have you to tell me?"

The man hesitated once more before he replied. He was the chosen mouth-piece of one of the most powerful organisations in Europe, and ere now affairs involving death, and worse than death, had been entrusted to him, and he had brought them to a satisfactory issue. As a rule, and certainly when

dealing with men, he did not know what fear was. In this lady's presence, however, he was strangely nervous.

"Come," she said, "you are a long time telling me. Is it so very difficult to explain? Or am I to anticipate a repetition of the Palermo Incident?"

Whatever the Palermo Incident may have been, it was certainly not a pleasant recollection to either of the men before her; the elder man became uncomfortable, while the younger moved uneasily in his seat.

"You hit hard, madam," the elder man returned; "but, thank goodness, I am not thin-skinned. That the Palermo affair was a mistake, I am quite prepared to admit; it is possible, however, the success which will doubtless attend this affair, will make ample amends for it."

"You have not told me what the affair is," the lady replied. "Unless you make haste, I fear I shall not be able to hear it to-night. It would be as well for you to remember that I am not my own mistress, and that, in return for his hospitality, my host has at least some claim upon my society."

"I will not detain you longer than is absolutely necessary," the other replied. "With your permission I will now explain my

mission. Of course, your Excellency is aware that the British Empire is on the eve of a serious struggle with the two South African Republics. The Republics in question have been arming for several years, and there can be no sort of doubt that the war, which is now about to begin, will make the most enormous demands upon the resources and capabilities of even that great Empire. That the country, at least so far as its military organisation is concerned, is not properly prepared for such an encounter, admits of no doubt. Her armament is well known to be deficient, if not defective; she possesses but few Generals whose experience entitles them to the right of leading her troops as they should be led against a foe which will have in its ranks some of the best fighting men in the world; while the nature of the country in which she will have to fight, and the peculiar tactics of the enemy, are unfavourable to her in the highest degree. Apart from this, it has been her boast that she occupies an isolated position in Europe, if not in the world. France, Russia, Germany and Holland are avowedly unfavourable; Spain remembers Great Britain's sympathy with America in the Cuban affair;

Portugal will wait to see what turn events take before she commits herself; while America will stand strictly neutral. We all remember that the larger Republic has beaten her before: it is possible that it may do so again. All these things having been taken into consideration, it must be quite clear to an observant mind that if England is ever to be humiliated, now is the time to do it. With this end in view, the Council was summoned hastily to meet in Prague. The result of their deliberations was the drawing up of a plan of action, and as soon as this had been agreed upon, I was ordered to place myself in communication with you. You were in Constantinople, and, as I have said, a message was immediately despatched by the Secretary to you."

"I received it, and am here. What am I to do?"

"I can tell you no more than that you are to make your way to England at once, *via* Rome and Paris. Von Rosendell is in Rome. He will meet you, and give you full particulars of the scheme which has been proposed."

"And when am I to leave Naples in order to meet him?"

"As soon as possible," the other replied;

"there is no time to waste. I was to invite you to make your arrangements at once, and to telegraph the hour of your departure in the usual way."

"In that case I need not detain you any longer," she answered with chilling politeness. "Should it be necessary for me to communicate with you, I presume the usual address will find you?"

"But——"

"But what? Is there anything else I am to hear?"

"There is this—that I am to go with you," the younger man put in, almost apologetically. "I received my orders from the Council this morning. I hope you do not disapprove?"

He looked at her almost beseechingly; the expression upon her face, however, betrayed neither pleasure nor annoyance. Do what he would, he could not prevent a sigh from escaping him as he became aware of it. All day he had been hoping that she would be pleased when she heard that he was to co-operate with her; now, however, his heart sank like lead. It was just the sort of enterprise he liked. It was daring, reckless to a degree; they would carry their lives in their hands, as they had so often done before; indeed, the mere fact that

he was to share the dangers with her had been the greatest pleasure he had known for months past.

"If you are to accompany us," she said, scarcely looking at him, "you had better hold yourself in readiness. It will be safer if we travel apart during the time we are in Italy, and afterwards other arrangements can be made so that we——"

"We will leave you and return to the shore," interrupted the man called Luigi, who did not altogether approve the turn affairs were taking. "I have carried out my instructions, and so far as I am concerned, individually, the matter is at an end."

Five minutes later they had left the yacht, and the Countess de Venetza was apologizing to the Duke of Rotherhithe for the intrusion of her lawyer people on his yacht.

"It is really too hard," she said pathetically; "they give me no peace. When my husband died and I inherited his estates, he had no thought of the trouble and anxiety the management of them would cause me. My lawyers are perpetually grumbling because they cannot obtain interviews with me. I often think that they look upon me as a sort of Will-o'-the-Wisp, flickering about Europe, and impossible

to catch. Why they could not have transacted the business with my father instead of bothering me with it, I cannot imagine. However, you will forgive me, will you not?"

The Duke, who by the way, was extremely susceptible, looked unutterable things. He had first met the Countess in Algiers a year before, and had fallen desperately in love with her before he had known her twenty-four hours. The mere fact that she did not encourage his attentions only served to attract him the more. They met at Cairo six months later—and now, when he discovered that it was in his power to do her a service by conveying her from Constantinople to Naples, he was only too glad to avail himself of the opportunity.

"It is a shame, indeed, that they should worry you so," he said sympathetically, looking as he spoke into his fair friend's eyes in a manner that would have carried consternation into the hearts of not a few mothers in England. "They worry me at home in much the same way. As I say to them, what's the use of employing lawyers and Estate Agents, and all those sort of people, if they cannot do their work without your assistance? You might just as well do it yourself in the first instance, and save their salaries. But then,

you see, I am not so clever as you are, Countess, and that makes all the difference."

"What makes you think I am so clever, pray?" she enquired, looking up at him with innocent eyes.

"Oh, I don't know," he replied; "I've noticed it on lots of occasions. Do you remember the day that plausible Greek beggar worried us so in Constantinople, and you whispered something to him that sent him off about his business like a shot out of a gun. And in Algiers, when that Frenchman made himself so objectionable and you managed to send him to the right-about after a few moments' conversation. How you did it I never could understand, but it was jolly clever all the same."

The Countess regarded him attentively for a moment. Was he really as innocent as he made out to be, or had he noticed anything else? No; one moment's examination was sufficient to convince her that, so far as he was concerned, all was as it should be. Strolling to the port side of the bridge, she looked down at the boat-load of musicians who were strumming guitars, and bawling "*Finiculi Finicula*," with all the strength of their Southern lungs.

"What a way in which to spend one's life," said the Duke, as he joined her, and tossed some silver into the boat. "Fancy shouting that wretched thing, week after week, and year after year! Italy is a funny country—all bandits, soldiers, beggars and musicians. I suppose, if the truth were known, each of those men belongs to some secret society or another. Either the Cammoristi, or the Mafia, or some such organisation. How would you like to be a conspirator, Countess, and be always in terror of being caught?"

The Countess's hand clenched the bar before her, and, for a moment, her face turned deathly pale.

"What an extraordinary question to ask," she began, fighting hard for her self-possession. "Do you want to frighten me out of my wits? I am afraid I should make the poorest conspirator imaginable. I should be too deficient in courage."

"I am not inclined to believe that," said the Duke, reflectively. "I think you would have plenty of courage when it was required."

"I am afraid you must think me an altogether remarkable person," she returned. "If you go on in this way, I shall scarcely have presence of mind enough to remain in

your company. Seriously, however, Duke, I don't know how to thank you for the services you have rendered my father and myself. But for your assistance we should not be in Naples now, in which case we should have been too late to have joined the party with whom I am proceeding to England."

"You are going to England then after all?" he cried in great astonishment and delight. "I thought you were only going as far as Rome?"

"That was our original intention," she replied. "However, some letters that we received to-night have altered our plans. But why do you look so astonished? Are we poor foreigners not to be allowed to enter your country?"

"It is not that," he said. "I was so pleased to hear that you intend honouring us with a visit. When do you think you will reach England, and where will you stay while you are there?"

She shook her head.

"Those are questions I cannot at present answer," she said. "It will depend upon circumstances. As our arrangements stand at present, I think it is extremely likely that we shall be in London in less than a week's time."

"And will there be any means of learning your whereabouts?" he asked. "You will surely not be cruel enough to visit England without permitting me to call upon you?"

"Call by all means," she answered. "At present, however, I cannot tell you what our address will be, for the reason that I do not know it myself."

"But perhaps when you are settled you will let me know. You know my house, I think?"

"I will do so with pleasure," she replied. "Then you will come and see me, and I shall be able to thank you again for the kindness you have shown my father and myself in our present trouble."

"It has been a very great pleasure to me," he said, "and I cannot thank you sufficiently for honouring my yacht as you have done."

At that moment the elder man, to whom she had referred as her father, made his appearance on the bridge and came towards them.

"My dear," he began, "has it not struck you that it is time for us to be thinking of bidding His Grace farewell? Remember we have to start for Rome by the early train to-morrow morning. It behoves us, therefore, to make our preparations as soon as possible."

The Duke, however, would not hear of their leaving the yacht before dinner, and in consequence it was quite dark when the Countess de Venetza and her father, or, to be more correct, her reputed father, were rowed ashore by four stalwart yachtsmen, steered by the Duke of Rotherhithe himself. He would have accompanied them to their hotel, but this the Countess would not permit.

"You have done too much for us already," she said; "we cannot let you do more. We will not say *aaieu*, but *au revoir*, since, in all probability, it will not be long before we meet again."

"I hope, with all my heart, it may not be," he replied, and then the cab they had engaged rattled away over the stones and was soon lost to view.

The Countess's stay in Naples was a short one, for next morning she left by an early train for Rome. According to the plan he had prepared, His Grace of Rotherhithe, having made enquiries as to the trains leaving Naples for the capital, was present on the platform when the first took its departure. With an eagerness that could only be accounted for by his infatuation, he scanned the faces of the passengers, but the lady for whom he

had been so anxiously waiting was not among them. Greatly disappointed by his discovery, he went off in search of breakfast, only to return a quarter of an hour before the next train was due to leave. Unfortunately, on this occasion, he was no more successful than before. The train was well filled, but among the passengers there was not one who bore any sort of resemblance to the lady he was hoping to see. So anxious was he to make sure that he did not miss her, that, just before the train started, he came within an ace of being run into by an invalid chair, in which was seated a man closely muffled up with shawls. By the side of the chair walked a nurse in English hospital uniform, who wore large blue glasses, and carried more wraps and a couple of cushions upon her arm. Even had he been aware of their identity, the Duke would have found it difficult to recognise in the pair his guests of the previous day. It was not the first time in their careers that they had been compelled to adopt such disguises, and only that morning news had reached them to the effect that, if they desired to get safely out of Naples, disguises such as they had assumed would be imperative necessities. A carriage, it appeared, had been reserved for the invalid

Englishman, and towards it they made their way. Having seated the old gentleman in one corner, the nurse took her seat opposite him, and busied herself preparing for the journey. It was not until Naples was far behind, however, that she removed her spectacles and the invalid discarded his wraps.

"That was as narrow an escape as we have ever had," said the former. "The Head of the Police was upon the platform, and I recognised two detectives in the crowd. However, all is well that ends well, and if Luigi's arrangements have been properly made, we should be in Paris before they know we have left Naples, and in London forty-eight hours afterwards."

"Then you still feel certain that they were aware of our presence in Naples?"

"Luigi's message said there was no doubt about it. Though he did not know it, they must have been watching him, and have followed him to the yacht. It was foolish of him to run such a risk. Let us hope, however, he will be able to get out of Naples without their laying hands upon him."

Shortly after one o'clock the train reached Rome and they alighted from it. Such travellers as had witnessed the arrival of the

invalid at the Neapolitan railway station, would have observed now that he seemed greatly fatigued by the journey. He was even more muffled up than before, while the nurse was, if possible, more assiduous in her attentions than she had been at the southern station. It was noticeable also that she was a poor Italian scholar. Indeed, her pronunciation of such words as she *did* know was of the most erratic and elementary description.

. . . . . .

Later in the day, just as dusk was falling, an artist's model, in the picturesque dress of the country, might have been observed making her way slowly down the Via Sistina in the direction of the Piazza S. Trinità de' Monti. She appeared to be familiar with the neighbourhood, though, on the other hand, no one seemed to have any acquaintance with her. She had reached the Casa Zuccheri, when she was stopped by a tall artistic-looking man, who walked with great uprightness, and carried a portfolio beneath his arm. For the benefit of the passers by, he enquired in broken Italian, whether the girl could inform him as to the locality of a certain artist's studio, whereupon she personally offered to conduct him to it.

He thanked her courteously, and proceeded with her in the direction indicated. They had no sooner left the vicinity of the Via Sistina, however, than he turned to her and said, in the purest Italian: "I was afraid you were not coming. You are very late."

"I am aware of that," the girl replied. "I had a suspicion that I was being watched. Now, what have you to tell me?"

"You saw Luigi in Naples, I believe?"

"He met me there, with Conrad," the girl answered. "I could not help thinking that it was an imprudence on his part."

"Luigi is always imprudent; and yet I cannot help feeling that he is safer in his folly than we are in our care. He told you of the scheme the Council had originated?"

The girl nodded an assent.

"He gave me to understand, however, that you would furnish me with full particulars," she said.

"I am prepared to do so now," her companion replied.

As he said this, he led her from the main street into a dark alley, where, having convinced himself that they had not been followed, he set to work and told his tale. So anxious was he that there should be no mistake

about the matter, that when he had finished it he began it again, only to repeat it a third time. The woman listened with rapt attention.

"In conclusion," said he, "I might add that the money will be paid to your credit at whatever London Bank you may select. One of the most handsome residences, replete with all the necessaries, has been taken for you in a fashionable quarter, and on your arrival in London you will be left to act as your knowledge of the situation and the dictates of the Council may determine. It is needless to caution you as to the risks you may be called upon to run. The Council has, moreover, authorised me to say that it places implicit trust in your discretion. Should you require further advice, it will be furnished you at once, with any help that may be considered needful."

"In the meantime, Paris is the first stage," the girl answered. "You are quite certain that this Englishman, Sir George Manderville, has not yet returned to England?"

"No, he is still there," her companion replied. "We have learnt, however, that he will cross the channel on Friday next."

"On Friday next?" she repeated. "In

that case there is no time to lose. At first glance it would appear that he is the key to the situation."

"That is exactly the opinion of the Council," the man answered. "Now, farewell, and may good luck attend you!"

So saying they retraced their steps to the main street. At the entrance to the alley they separated, the girl returning to the Via Sistina—the man going off in an opposite direction.

By the first train next morning the Countess de Venetza made an unostentatious departure from Rome, for Paris, accompanied by her father and her cousin, Conrad, Count Reiffenburg.

CHAPTER I

AS a preface, I might explain that I have had the pleasure of knowing Paris and De Belleville for more than twenty years. Both are, therefore, old friends, the city and the man. The fact, however, remains, that De Belleville, though a most charming companion, has one fault. Few people would be prepared to admit it, but unfortunately, I am not only compelled to recognise it, but to proclaim it to the world. As a friend, he has not his equal—at least so far as I am concerned; he is certainly not punctual, however. It is of that I complain. I have remonstrated with him on the subject times out of number, but it makes no sort of difference. If one has an appointment with him, he is invariably late, but when he does put in an appearance, he will greet you with such charming assurance, that you feel angry with yourself for having been led into commenting upon the lapse of time.

On the particular afternoon which I am now about to describe to you, we had arranged to meet at my hotel and then to go on together to call upon the D'Etrebilles, who were just off to Cairo and the Upper Nile. He had promised to be with me at three o'clock, and, as usual, at twenty minutes past the hour he had not put in an appearance. Now, I flatter myself that I am a punctual man in every respect, and when one is ready to go out, a twenty minutes' wait is an annoyance calculated to test the serenest temper. In my case it was certainly so, and, as I sat in the picturesque courtyard of the hotel, you may be sure I called down the reverse of blessings upon De Belleville's handsome head. Carriage after carriage drove up, but not one of them contained my friend. I took a third cigarette from my case and lit it, and as I did so, lay back in my chair and amused myself watching my neighbours.

To my thinking, there are few places more interesting (that is, of course, provided one has a weakness for studying character) than a hotel courtyard. In sheer idleness I speculated as to the nationality and relationship of the various people about me. There were several probable Russians, one or two un-

doubted Germans, two whom I set down as Italians, one might have been a Greek, but the majority were undoubtedly English. And that reminds me that, as I waited, I was the witness of an amusing altercation between a cabman and an English lady of considerable importance and mature years. Both were playing at cross purpose, and it was not until the Hotel Commissionaire, the *deus ex machina*, so to speak, appeared upon the scene and interposed, that the matter at issue was satisfactorily adjusted.

"Your pardon, Madame," he said, bowing low, "but ze man meant no harm. It was his misfortune that he did not comprehend the words what Madame said to him."

For a person who prided himself upon his tact, the poor fellow could scarcely have said a more unfortunate thing. The matter of the overcharge, Madame could have understood and have forgiven, but to be informed in so many words that her knowledge of the French tongue was deficient, was an insult not only to her intelligence, and to her experience, but also to the money that had been spent upon her education. Casting a withering glance at the unhappy functionary, she departed into

the hotel, every hair of her head bristling with indignation, while the Commissionaire, shrugging his shoulders, went forward to receive a tall, picturesque individual, who at that moment had driven up.

The new-comer interested me exceedingly. In my own mind I instantly set him down as a *dilettante* Englishman of good birth and education. He looked the sort of being who would spend the greater part of his time in foreign picture-galleries and cathedrals; who would carry his Ruskin continually in his pocket, and who would probably end by writing a volume of travels "*for private circulation only.*" I should not have been surprised had I been told that he dabbled a little in water-colours, or to have heard that he regarded Ruskin as the greatest writer, and Turner as the greatest painter, of our era. One thing at least was self-evident, and that was the fact that he was a person of considerable importance at this particular hotel. The Commissionaire bowed before him as if he were a foreign potentate, while the *maître d'hôtel* received him with as much respect as if he had been an American millionaire. When he in his turn disappeared into the building, I beckoned the Commissionaire to my side.

"Who is that gentleman that has just entered the hotel?" I enquired.

"Is it possible that Monsieur does not know him?" the man replied, with an expression of wonderment upon his face.

His answer more than ever convinced me that the other was a very great man, at least a German princeling, perhaps an Austrian archduke.

"No," I said, "I do not know him. As a matter of fact, I do not remember ever having seen him before. Who is he?"

"He is Monsieur Dickie Bucks," answered the Commissionaire, with as much respect as if he were talking of the Czar of all the Russias.

My illusion vanished in a trice. "Dickie Bucks,—Dickie Bucks," I repeated to myself. "Gracious heavens! what a name for such a man! And pray who is Mr Dickie Bucks, for I assure you his fame has not yet reached me?"

"Monsieur surely knows the great bookmaker," said the man, with an air of incredulity. "He is the great bookmaker, the very greatest, perhaps, in all England. Monsieur is not perhaps aware that there are races at Auteuil to-morrow."

And so my *dilettante* Englishman, my artist,

my amateur author, was, after all, nothing more than a famous betting man, who, had I spoken to him of Ruskin, would probably have offered to lay me five to one against him for the Lincolnshire Handicap, and would have informed me that there was a general opinion in Sporting Circles that "Sesame and Lilies" was not the stayer she was popularly supposed to be. Well, well, it only proves how little our judgment is to be trusted, and how important it is that we should not pin our faith upon externals.

I was still moralising in this fashion when a smart equipage drove up to the steps, and the Commissionaire once more went forward to do his duty. In the carriage a lady and gentleman were seated, and it was evident, from the fact that a man,—who until that moment had been sitting near the hotel door—hastened forward to greet them, that their arrival had been expected by one person in the hotel at least. As the trio I am now about to describe to you are destined to play an extraordinary part in the story I have to tell, I may, perhaps, be excused if I bestow upon them a little more attention than I should otherwise feel justified in doing. Out of gallantry, if for no other reason, it is only proper that I should commence with the lady.

That she was not English was quite certain. It was difficult to say, however, to what European nation she belonged. Her face, from the moment I first saw it, interested me strangely. And yet, while it was beautiful, it was not that which altogether attracted me. I say *altogether*, for the reason that it owed more, perhaps, to its general expression than to the mere beauty of any individual feature. It was a countenance, however, that once seen would not be likely to be forgotten. The eyes were large and thoughtful, and of a darkness that suggested Southern birth. The mouth was small, but exquisitely moulded, the lips full, and the teeth, when they showed themselves, delightfully white and even. Her hair was black and, what is not commonly the case with hair of that colour, was soft and wavy. Though it would have been difficult to find fault with her attire, a fastidious critic might have observed that it was not of the very latest fashion. In London, it is possible it might have passed muster, but in Paris it was just one pin-prick behind the acme of the prevailing mode. As I looked at her I wondered who she might be. The eyes, at a hazard, might have been set down as Italian, the hair as Spanish, the nose had a suggestion of the Greek, while the sum

total spoke for Southern France, or, at any rate a country bordering upon the Mediterranean.

As I have already said, her companions were two in number. The elder, who had driven up with the lady I have been endeavouring to describe, was a tall and handsome man of a little past middle age. He carried himself with considerable erectness, might very well have once been a soldier, and was possibly the lady's father. When he descended from the carriage, I noticed that he was a little lame on his left leg, and that he walked with a stick. Like his companion he was the possessor of dark eyes, but with the difference that they looked out upon the world from beneath white bushy eyebrows, a fact which, combined with his fierce grey moustache, produced a most singular effect. He also was fashionably attired, that is to say, he wore the regulation frock coat and silk hat, but, as was the case with the lady, there was the suggestion of being just a trifle behind the times.

As much could not be said of the second man, the individual who had been seated near the door awaiting their coming. So far as outward appearances were concerned he was the pink of fashion, and not only of fashion, but of everything else. Tall, lithe,

handsome, and irreproachably turned out, from the curl of his dainty moustache to his superbly shod feet, he appeared at first glance to be a typical *boulevardier*. Yet when one looked more closely at him, he did not strike one as being the sort of man who would idle his life away on the pavements or in the clubs. I could very well imagine his face looking out from beneath a helmet or *kepi*, under a *tarbush* with Arabi, or a *sombrero* with Balmaceda—anywhere, in point of fact, where there was vigorous life and action. He would certainly be a good shot, and, I reflected, not very particular what he shot at, that is to say, whether it was at man or beast, or both. For the moment, however, he was content to hand his fair friend from her carriage with the most fastidious politeness. They stood for a moment talking at the foot of the steps. Then they ascended, and, entering the hotel, were lost to my sight; whereupon I resettled myself in my chair with the reflection that they were the most interesting people I should be likely to see that afternoon, and then went on to wonder why De Belleville did not put in an appearance. Then another carriage drove up, and a moment later he stood before me.

"I must offer you ten thousand pardons, *cher ami*," said he, as we shook hands. "I fear I have kept you waiting an unpardonable time. Forgive me, I implore you; I am prostrated with sorrow."

The words were apologetic enough, but the face belied the assertion. A more cheerful countenance could scarcely have been discovered in all Paris. I had promised myself that I would give him a good rating for his unpunctuality, but, as usual, I found that when he *did arrive* it was impossible for me to be angry with him. De Belleville, as I have already remarked, boasts the most ingratiating manners I know; is an ideal companion, for the reason that he is never put out or, apart from his unpunctuality, puts others out. He is one of the best hosts in Europe, and regards life as life regards him, that is to say, with invariable cheerfulness and goodfellowship.

Having taken our places in the carriage, we set off for the D'Etrebilles' residence in the Faubourg St Germain. Throughout the drive my companion rattled on continually. He was well up, none better, in the gossip of the day, and could use his knowledge to the wittiest effect. Fortunately, the D'Etrebilles

were at home, and appeared delighted to see us. They were, moreover, kind enough to congratulate me upon my acceptance of my new position in the English Cabinet.

"As you are strong, be merciful," said D'Etrebille, with a smile. "Remember, the peace of Europe is in your hands, and at the end of your term of office we shall require it of you again intact."

"A life-long study of European politics," said De Belleville, "has convinced me that the peace of Europe is never so much assured as when the various nations are struggling to be at each other's throats. This is a point of which so many people, renowned for their political perspicuity, seem to lose sight. Our very good friend and visitor, the Czar, would have us disarm and turn our swords into ploughshares. By this time, however, he must agree that, if only from a humanitarian point of view, he has made a mistake. It may appear paradoxical, but there is certainly nothing that promotes peace so much as war. I never feel sure in my own mind that the next year will be a quiet one until I am told that the military bloodhounds are about to be unchained. By the way, what do you think of your country's prospects of war in South Africa?"

"If I am to judge the situation by your own theory, I should say that the possibilities are remote," I replied. "From my own stand-point, however, I am by no means so optimistic. The look-out is undoubtedly a grave one, and, while I have the greatest faith in our strength to assert our own supremacy, I cannot help thinking that matters may in the end prove somewhat different to our expectations."

Without wishing to pose as a prophet after the event, on looking back on all that has happened, I cannot help being struck by the aptness of my prophecy. This, however, is no place for such reflections. What I have to do is to tell my story as quickly and concisely as possible, and, above all, to avoid undue digressions.

Strange indeed is the way in which a face or a voice once seen or heard, if only for a moment, has the power of seizing and taking possession of the memory, when there is little or no reason that it should not be forgotten. It was certainly so in my case on this particular afternoon, for, during the time I was with the D'Etrebilles, during our drive in the Bois afterwards, and in fact for the remainder of the evening, the face of the

woman I had seen entering my hotel a few hours before, haunted me continually.

It went to the Opera with me, accompanied me to a supper at the Amphitryon Club afterwards, and returned with me again to my hotel. The memory of a pair of beautiful eyes, such as hers undoubtedly were, might appear to many men a light burden to have placed upon them. By some strange irony of Fate, however, it was otherwise with me. Instead of being charmed by them, I dreaded them with a fear that was as inexplicable as it was unpleasant. I laughed at myself for my folly, ascribed my absurd condition to indigestion, and endeavoured by every means in my power to drive the matter from my mind. I went to bed and tried to sleep. I was not successful, however. When I closed my eyes, the eyes of the woman were still there, gazing at me with a steadfastness that produced a sensation almost describable as hypnotic. I tried to picture other scenes, recalled the events of the day—De Belleville's prophecies for the future—his witty remarks on Paris topics—but without success. At last, unable to bear it any longer, I rose from my bed, turned on the electric light, and, having donned a dressing-gown, began to pace the room. I

had drunk scarcely any wine that evening, so that my condition could not be ascribed to that source. Nevertheless, an ill defined, yet none the less real, fear was steadily taking possession of me. I could not remember ever having been affected in this way before. Could it be that I had not the same power over my intellect as of yore? In other words, was this the beginning of some brain trouble that would eventually land me in a lunatic asylum? I knew in my inmost heart that such was not the case. Yet how to account for the eyes that haunted me so peculiarly, I could not say. Until I had seen the woman's face that afternoon, I had been as rational and evenly balanced a man as could have been discovered in the French capital. No! it was all nonsense! My internal economy was a little out of gear, my nerves and brain were indirectly affected, and this illusion was the result. In that case the eyes, haunting as they were, would disappear before the magic wand of Calomel.

Being too wide awake to return to bed, I seated myself in a chair and took up a book on the Eastern Question which I had been reading during the day, and in which I was greatly interested. The fact that I did

not entertain the same views with regard to the Russo-Chinese-Japanese *entente* as the author only added to my enjoyment of the work. I remembered that when I had taken it up in the morning I had found it difficult to lay it aside again; now, however, though I glued my eyes to the pages by sheer will pressure, I was scarcely conscious of the printed words before me. As I read, or rather tried to read, it appeared to me that somebody was standing in the room, a few paces from my chair, intently regarding me. More than once I involuntarily looked up, only to find, as it is needless to state, that there was no one there. At last I put down the book in despair, went to the window and, leaning my arms upon the sill, looked out. Sleeping Paris lay before and around me, scarcely a sound was to be heard; once the roll of distant carriage-wheels, from the Rue de Rivoli, came up to me, then the irregular striking of the clocks in the neighbourhood announcing the hour of three.

As I stood at the window, I thought of the crisis which England was approaching. Many years had elapsed since she had been involved in a great war. In these days epoch succeeds epoch with incredible

rapidity, and public opinion has the knack of changing with each one. The stolidity, the self-reserve, the faculty of being able to take the hard knocks and yet continue the fight, that had characterised us at the time of Waterloo and the Crimea, did that still exist? Then again, were we as fully prepared as we might be? Were our Generals as competent as of yore, or had the long spell of peace wrought a change in them also? They were weighty questions, and a man might very well have been pardoned had he asked them of himself with an anxious heart. Our "splendid isolation" had been the jeer and taunt of the world. Would that very isolation prove our downfall, if by any evil chance matters took a wrong turn with us? For a moment I could see England as she would be were her armies to be defeated in the present struggle. The croaking prophecies of her enemies would have proved too true, and she would be at the mercy of the yelping mob that had once only dared to bark and snap at her from a distance. "O God! grant that such a thing may never come to pass," I muttered, and, as the prayer escaped my lips, there shaped themselves in the darkness in front of me, the eyes that had haunted me all the afternoon and evening.

As I gazed into their soulless depths, a sensation of icy coldness passed over me.

"This will never do," I said to myself. "If I go on like this I shall have to see a doctor; and yet how ridiculous it is. Why that woman's eyes should haunt me so I cannot understand. In all probability I shall never see her again, and if I do, it will only be to discover that she is very beautiful, but in no respect different to other people."

But while I endeavoured to convince myself that it was all so absurd, I had the best of reasons for knowing that it was not so silly as I was anxious to suppose. At any rate, I did not go to bed again, and when, some hours later, my servant came to call me, he found me seated at my table, busily engaged writing letters. Years seemed to have elapsed since I had bade him good-night.

The last day of my stay in Paris had dawned, and, after my experience of the night, I began to think that I was not altogether sorry for it. A cold tub, however, somewhat revived me, and when I left my room I was, to all intents and purposes, myself once more.

It is one of those little idiosyncrasies in my character which afford my friends such an

excellent opportunity for making jokes at my expense, that when I go to Rome, Paris, Berlin, St Petersburg, or any other city I may be in the habit of visiting, that I invariably stay at the same hotel and insist on being given the same bedroom I have occupied on previous occasions. For some reason a strange room is most obnoxious to me. In Paris, worthy Monsieur Frezmony is good enough to let me have a suite of apartments at the end of a long corridor on the first floor. They boast an excellent view from the windows, of the gardens of the Tuileries, and the whole suite is, above all, easy of access at any hour of the day or night. On this particular occasion, having dressed, I left my room and passed along the corridor in order to descend to the hall below. I was only a few paces from the head of the stairs when a door directly opposite opened, and a lady emerged and descended the stairs in front of me. She was dressed for going out, but, for the reason that my letters had just been handed to me and I was idly glancing at the envelopes, beyond noticing this fact, I bestowed but little more attention on her. She had reached the first landing, and I was some few steps behind her, when the chink of something

falling caught my ears. Surely enough when I, in my turn, reached the landing I discovered a small bracelet lying upon the carpet. I immediately picked it up with the intention of returning it. But the lady was too quick for me and had reached the courtyard before I could set foot in the hall. A carriage was awaiting her coming at the foot of the steps, and she had already taken her place in it when I approached her. For the reason that she was putting up her parasol, it was impossible for me to see her face, but when she lifted it on hearing my voice, I discovered, to my amazement, that she was none other than the lady whose arrival I had witnessed on the previous afternoon, and whose eyes had had such a strange effect upon me ever since.

"Permit me to ask if this is your property, madam?" I began, holding out the bracelet as I spoke. "I had the good fortune to discover it on the stairs just after you passed."

"Ah, yes, it is mine," she answered in excellent French, and in a voice that was low and musical. "I would not have lost it for anything. It was careless of me to have dropped it. I thank you most heartily."

She bowed, and at a signal from the Commissionaire, the coachman started his horses,

and a moment later the carriage had left the courtyard.

For some moments after it had passed out of sight I stood looking in the direction it had taken. Then turning to the Commissionaire who stood before me, I enquired if it were in his power to tell me the name of the lady to whom I had rendered so small a service.

"She is Madame la Comtesse de Venetza," the man replied.

"The Countess de Venetza?" said I to myself, "that tells me nothing. It sounds Italian. At the same time it might be almost anything else."

Circumstances forbade me that I should question the man further, though the temptation was sufficiently great. Nothing remained, therefore, but to withdraw and to derive what consolation I could from the fact that I had spoken to her and knew her name.

"The Countess de Venetza," I repeated, as I made my way up the steps once more. The name had suddenly come to have a strange fascination for me. I found myself repeating it again and again, each time deriving a new sensation from it.

Having procured a morning paper, I returned to the verandah, seated myself in the place I

had occupied on the previous afternoon, when I had first seen the Countess, and turned my attention to the English news. If the information set forth there were to be believed, there could be no sort of doubt that we were distinctly nearer the trouble which had been brewing for so long. The wildest rumours were afloat, and the versions printed in the Parisian papers were not of a nature calculated to allay my fears. If what they said were correct there could be no doubt that England was standing face to face with one of the greatest dangers that had threatened her in her life as a nation. And yet it was impossible to believe that the Might, Majesty, Dominion, and power of Great Britain could be successfully defied by a rabble horde such as we knew the Boers to be. But had we not the remembrance of '81 continually with us to remind us that on another lamentable occasion we had been too sanguine? This time, I told myself, it was vitally necessary that it should be all going forward and no drawing back. If we set our hands to the plough, it must be with a rigorous determination not to remove them until the task we had set ourselves should be accomplished.

At last I threw down my paper in disgust.

An overwhelming desire to thrash every journalistic cur who yelped at the heels of the British Lion was fast taking possession of me. For the first time since I had known her, Paris was positively distasteful to me.

"Perhaps monsieur will pardon me if I ask permission to glance at the paper he has just thrown down," said a polite voice at my elbow. "I have tried to obtain one at the hotel, but without success."

Turning, I saw beside me the taller of the two men I had seen with the Countess de Venetza on the preceding afternoon—the man with the bushy eyebrows who had driven up with her in the carriage, and who was lame.

"Take it by all means," I replied, handing it to him as I spoke. "I doubt, however, if you will find anything in it but a series of insults to England and her soldiers. That seems to be the *metier* of the Parisian Press just now."

"It is a thousand pities," the stranger replied, slowly and solemnly; "and the more to be regretted for the reason that it does not voice the public sentiment."

I had no desire to be drawn into a political controversy with a man who, for all I knew to the contrary, might be an anarchist, a police

spy, or an equally undesirable acquaintance. I accordingly allowed him to seat himself at some little distance from me and to peruse his paper in peace. He was still reading it when a carriage drove up, bringing the Countess de Venetza back to the hotel. Seeing her friend she approached him, whereupon he rose to greet her, still retaining the newspaper in his hand.

A few moments later another carriage drove up, and, when it came to a standstill, the well-dressed individual who had waited in the verandah on the previous afternoon, alighted. That he was much agitated could be seen at first glance. I noticed also that he was doing his best to conceal the fact. As he approached his friends, he raised his hat with ceremonious politeness. Then he said something in an undertone which would have been inaudible more than a few paces away. The effect upon his comrades was electrical. The man gave a start of astonishment and horror, while the woman turned deathly pale, and for a moment looked as if she were about to faint. With an effort, however, she recovered her self-possession, and as she did so I noticed out of the corner of my eye (for the life of me I could not help watching them), that the man who

had brought this disconcerting intelligence turned quickly round as if to satisfy himself that her agitation had not been noticed by any one near at hand. Next moment they were walking slowly towards the main entrance, the woman's hands clenching and unclenching at every step. It was no business of mine, of course, but I felt as certain that the drama I had seen acted in front of me was of vital importance to the trio, but more especially so far as the woman was concerned. Had I known what the communication was, it is just possible I might have been able to avert what promised to be a great National calamity, and one which even now I can scarcely contemplate without a shudder.

How I came to know these things and how innocently I walked into the trap that had been so artfully laid for me, you shall hear. Believe me, if I say, without conceit, that the story is an exceedingly interesting one.

CHAPTER II

MY arrangements were completed, and in spite of De Belleville's entreaty that I should remain for at least another day, I was adamant in my determination to leave Paris for England that night. In view of the existing state of affairs there, it would be a truism to say that there was much to be done before the assembling of Parliament; it behoved us all, we knew, to put our shoulders to the wheel and to do our utmost to help our country in her hour of need. Accordingly, the appointed moment found me at the railway station, whither my servant had preceded me. Williams is the best courier as well as the best servant in existence, and when I reached the platform it was to find my compartment reserved for me, my books and papers spread out to my hand, my cap and travelling rug in readiness, and the faithful man himself on guard at the door. It only wanted three minutes to starting time, and already the

various functionaries were busying themselves with intending passengers.

"It looks as if we shall have a full train, Williams," I said, as I stood at the door gazing down the platform. "Let us hope we shall have a good crossing!"

"The weather report is favourable, sir," he replied.

I returned to the other end of the carriage to look for my cigar-case and was in the act of cutting a weed when I heard Williams' voice raised as if in expostulation.

"I must beg your pardon, sir," he was saying in his curious French, that no experience ever makes any better or any worse, "but this is a reserved compartment."

"But, my good fellow, there is no more room in the train," said a voice I instantly recognised. "Pray speak to your master and I am sure he will not deny our request."

I walked to the door where this conversation was being carried on, to discover the lady and the two men who have already figured so prominently in my narrative, standing upon the platform.

"I am afraid we are taking an unwarrantable liberty in asking such a favour from you," the elder man began, "but by our carelessness we

are placed in a dilemma. We omitted to secure a compartment, and now the train is so full that we cannot procure seats. It is most necessary for us to cross to London to-night, and unless you will go so far out of your way as to permit us to share your carriage with you, I fear we must remain behind. The train is about to start even now."

Though I had no desire for their company, courtesy forbade that I should insist upon my rights. Nothing remained for it, therefore, but for me to submit with as much graciousnes as I could assume.

"Pray step in," I said. "It is the fault of the Railway Authorities who should provide sufficient accommodation for travellers. May I ask which seat you prefer, madame?"

With an expression of her thanks she chose the corner at the further end of the compartment, and opposite the corner Williams had prepared for me. Her companions followed her, and a moment later the train moved slowly out of the station and our journey had commenced. That journey will be remembered by two of our number, at least, so long as they can recollect anything. I am not going to pretend that I felt at my ease for the first part of it. Far from it. I fancy the

Countess must have noticed this, for she did not address me for some time, vouchsafing me an opportunity of becoming accustomed to the novelty of the situation. Then, feeling that it was incumbent on me to do the honours of the compartment, I offered her her choice of papers. She chose one, and, when she had opened it, assured me that I was at liberty to smoke, should I care to do so. Her companions had also made themselves at home, so that by the time our train ran through Ailly-sur-Noye we might have been said to have been on comparatively intimate terms with each other.

"I have an idea that my father and I have had the pleasure of meeting an old friend of yours lately," said the Countess, when the station to which I have just referred was a thing of the past and we were speeding on towards the sea.

"Really!" I replied, with some little astonishment. "Pray, who might that friend be?"

"The Duke of Rotherhithe," she returned, and, as she said it, she neatly folded the paper she had been reading and laid it on the seat beside her.

"A friend of mine, indeed," I answered.

"I fancied, however, that he was yachting in the Mediterranean?"

"Exactly! He was! We met him quite by chance in Constantinople, and, finding that we were anxious to reach Naples as quickly as possible, he offered to convey us thither in his yacht. I remember that he spoke most kindly of you."

"The dear fellow!" I replied. "We were at school together and afterwards at the 'Varsity."

So easily impressed is the human mind by former associations, that the mere fact that the Countess de Venetza and her father had lately been the guests of my old friend, Rotherhithe, was sufficient to make me treat them in an entirely different fashion to what I had hitherto done. Until that time I had rather prided myself upon being a somewhat sceptical man of the world, but, now I was giving splendid proofs of my peculiar susceptibility. There was, however, a grain of suspicion still lingering about me. I accordingly proceeded to indirectly question her concerning my friend, and, as I noticed that she answered without hesitation or any attempt at concealment, my doubts faded away until they vanished altogether. We talked of the *Princess Balroubadour* with

the familiarity of old friends; Rotherhithe's antipathy to those whom he described as "foreigners" afforded us conversation for another five minutes; while the Malapropisms, if I may coin a word, of his head steward, were sufficient to carry us through two more stations without a single break in the conversation. We discussed the various Ports of the Mediterranean, ran up to Assuan in a *dahabiyeh*, and afterwards made a pilgrimage to Sinai together. The Countess was a witty conversationalist and, as I discovered, a close observer of all that went on around her. Her father and cousin, beyond putting in a word now and again, scarcely spoke, but seemed absorbed in their books and papers.

At last we reached Calais, and it became necessary for us to leave the train. It was a beautiful evening; the sea was as smooth as glass, while there was not enough wind to stir the pennant on the steamer's masthead.

"I am sure we cannot thank you enough for permitting us to share your carriage," said the Countess as we left the train and prepared to go on board the steamer. "Had it not been for your kindness, I fear we should still be in Paris, instead of being well on our way to England."

I returned something appropriate to this remark, then, side by side, we boarded the steamer.

"Since you have been yachting with the Duke of Rotherhithe," I said, when we had gained the deck, "it is only fair to suppose that you are a good sailor, Countess?"

"Oh, yes!" she answered, with a little laugh; "I am an excellent sailor. But—forgive my asking the question—how did you become aware of my identity?"

"I happened to hear your name at the hotel this morning," I replied. "It was told me after I had restored the bangle you so nearly lost."

At this moment her father put in an appearance and caused a diversion by enquiring after the safety of her jewel-case, which, it appeared, stood in continual danger of being lost. A few seconds later the boat was under weigh and we had said good-bye to French soil. As we left the place of embarkation it seemed to me that my companion gave a little sigh, and noticing that it was followed by a slight shiver, I enquired whether she felt cold. She replied in the negative, though at the same time she drew her furs a little closer round her.

"I wonder whether certain places affect you as they do me," she said, when the French port lay well astern and we were heading for the white cliffs of England. "It is strange that I never leave Calais without undergoing a decided feeling of depression. I don't know why it should be so; it is a fact, nevertheless."

"I hope it is not the thought of visiting England that causes it?" I replied with an attempt at jocularity. "You have visited our country before, of course?"

"Very often," she answered; "we have many friends in England."

"In the list of whom I hope you will permit me some day to number myself?" I continued with an eagerness that was not at all usual with me.

"I shall be very pleased," she returned quietly, and then looked away across the still water to where a French pilot cutter lay becalmed half a mile or so away.

An hour later we reached Dover.

Just as we were entering the harbour, the Countess's father approached me and thanked me effusively for my kindness in permitting them to share my carriage from Paris.

"But you must not let my generosity, such

as it is, cease there!" I replied. "I hope you will also share my carriage to London, that is to say if the Countess is not already too tired of my society."

"It would be ungenerous to say so if I were," she answered with a smile. "But if you, on your side, do not feel that we have trespassed too far already, I am sure we shall be only too glad to accept your kind offer."

The Custom authorities having been satisfied as to the innocence of our baggage, we took our seats in the carriage which had been reserved for me. My indispensable Williams made his appearance with an armful of papers, and then we started upon the last stage of our journey. When I had handed the Countess a copy of the *Globe*, I selected a *Pall Mall* for myself, and turned to the page containing the latest war news. From what I found there, there could be no doubt that the situation was hourly increasing in danger. There were complications on every side, and the position was not rendered easier by the fact that a certain number of prominent politicians were endeavouring to make capital out of the difficulties of the Government.

"I suppose there can now be no doubt as to

the probability of war?" said Count Reiffenburg, looking up from his paper as he spoke.

"None whatever, I should say," I answered. "If the papers are to be believed the clouds are blacker and heavier than they have yet been. I fear the storm must burst ere long."

The Countess did not take any part in our conversation, but I fancied that she was listening. Not feeling any desire to continue the discussion with the younger man, I returned to my paper, leaving him to follow my example. A few minutes later the Countess put down her *Globe*, and sat looking out upon the country through which we were passing.

"I see they have captured another notorious anarchist in Naples," I said, after we had been sitting in silence for some minutes. "So far as can be gathered from the report given here, the arrest is likely to prove important in more respects than one."

"Indeed," said the Countess, looking steadily at me as she spoke. "The police are certainly becoming more expeditious in the matter of arrests. The only difficulty they experience is the finding of any substantial crime against their victims when they have brought about their capture. Pray, who is this particular man?"

"An individual rejoicing in the romantic name of Luigi Ferreira," I answered. "It appears that they have been endeavouring to lay their hands upon him for some time past. Until now, however, he has managed to slip through their fingers."

"Poor fellow!" said the Countess, still in the same even voice. "I hope it will not prejudice you against me, but I cannot help feeling a little sympathy for people—however misguided they may be—who imperil their own safety for the sake of bringing about what they consider the ultimate happiness of others."

Then, as though the matter no longer interested her, she returned to the perusal of her paper. Her cousin had all this time been drumming with his fingers in an impatient manner, so I thought, upon the glass of the window beside which he sat. For my own part, I scarcely knew what to make of this young man. Though he did not show it openly, I could not help thinking that he was jealous of the attention I was paying his fair cousin. As the idea crossed my mind I remembered the previous afternoon, when I had sat in the portico of the hotel, speculating as to the nationality and lives of

the people about me. How little I had thought then that twenty-four hours later would find me seated with them in an English railway carriage, discussing the fortune of another man with whom neither I, nor they, for the matter of that—at least, so I then supposed—had even the remotest connection.

It was not until we were approaching the end of our journey that I spoke to my *vis-à-vis* concerning her stay in London.

"We shall in all probability remain in London for some three or four months," she said. "I hope, if you can spare the time, that you will call upon me. I have taken Wiltshire House, by the way, and shall be most pleased to see you."

I must confess that her announcement caused me a considerable amount of surprise. All things considered, it was rather a strange coincidence, for, only that morning, I had received a letter from my sister Ethelwyn, who, as you are doubtless aware, is the Countess of Brewarden, in which occurred the following significant passage (Ethelwyn, I might here remark, is somewhat given to the florid style):—

"Existence is now altogether a blank! the dream of my life—Wiltshire House—has vanished. Some rich

foreigner has taken it, and in consequence George (my brother-in-law) and I have quarrelled desperately. He declares it is a good thing it *is* let, as he couldn't think of it. He moreover avers that it would cost a king's ransom to keep up. Nevertheless, I shall detest the foreigner whoever she or he may be."

I can scarcely say how I derived the impression, but, until that moment, I had not supposed my fair friend to be the possessor of any great wealth. It was the more surprising, therefore, to hear that she was not only a rich woman, but also that she was to be the temporary mistress of one of the most beautiful and expensive dwellings in the Metropolis. Needless to say, I did not let her become aware of the surprise she had given me, but contented myself with thanking her and expressing the hope that shortly I should be able to do myself the honour of calling upon her.

"You won't allow your public duties to make you forget your promise to come and see me, I hope," said the Countess, as we shook hands.

"You may be quite sure that I shall not," I replied.

"Then, *au revoir*, and many thanks for the kindness you have shown us."

"It has given me the greatest possible

pleasure," I answered, and, as I said it, I had a guilty remembrance of my uncharitable feelings that morning, when I had discovered that my privacy was destined to be disturbed. Yet so pleasantly had the time passed, that I felt as if I had known the Countess for years instead of hours.

When I reached my house it was to find everything just as I had left it. A cheerful fire blazed in my study, the latest evening papers lay, cut and folded, upon a table beside my favourite chair; a subdued light shone above the table in the dining-room adjoining, and everything denoted the care and comfort which a master possessing good servants has a right to expect. Having removed the stains of travel, and changed my attire, I sat down to dinner, afterwards spent an hour skimming my correspondence, then, to fill up the time, I ordered a cab and drove to my favourite Club.

Though I had only been absent from England a short time, and had not been further than Paris, I discovered that I had a vast amount of news to hear. Men imparted their information to me as if I had that day returned from Central Africa or the Australian Bush. Young Paunceford, the member for Banford, for which place his father had sat before him,

was good enough to give me his views on the Crisis. His complaint was that no one would listen to him, and, in consequence, he was only too glad to find some one who required bringing up to date. That I happened to be a Cabinet Minister as well as an old friend made no sort of difference.

"By Jove, I envy you," he said, as he lit a fresh cigar. "I can tell you, if you play your cards carefully, you'll be no end of a swell over this business. Why on earth couldn't I have had such an opportunity?"

"For the simple reason that you know too much, my boy," said a man in the Guards, who happened to be sitting near. "Haven't you heard that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing? They know Manderville's safe on a secret, so they gave him the job. What's the use of a secret unless there's some mystery about it. By the way, talking of mysteries, what's this about Wiltshire House? Somebody tells me that it has been let to the prettiest woman in Europe. Do any of you know anything about her?"

Paunceford was as well informed upon this as upon all other subjects.

"Of course," he replied; "the news is as old as the hills. I heard it from Bill Kingsbury,

who was in the agent's shop, or office—whatever they call it—when the business was being arranged. But it's all nonsense about her being the prettiest woman in Europe. Hailed from Jamaica, I believe; has to own to curly hair and to just one touch of the tar-brush."

"Paunceford seems to know all about her," said another man. "He always is well informed, however, upon any matter, whatever it may be. If there's going to be a war the House ought to vote a sum sufficient to send him out, in order that he may keep the Authorities posted on the progress of affairs. You've missed your vocation, Paunceford; you'd make an ideal War Correspondent."

"Too much imagination," said the man in the Guards; "military matters must be taken seriously. But nobody has answered my question yet. Who is this lady who has taken Wiltshire House?"

"I have already told you," said Paunceford sulkily. "I never came across such a set of unbelievers."

"Elderly, coloured, and of West Indian origin?" said the Guardsman. "It doesn't sound well."

I could stand it no longer.

"For goodness sake," I put in, "don't go about the town spreading that report. I assure you Paunceford is, as usual, altogether out of it."

"How do you know that?" asked Paunceford suspiciously.

"Because I happen to have had the good-fortune to travel with the lady from Paris to-day," I replied, with just that little touch of satisfaction the position warranted.

"And yet you kept quiet about it," said another man. "Well, you are a reticent beggar, I must say. Don't you know this has been one of the mysteries of the town. My goodness, man, you shan't escape from this room until you have told us all about her! Who is she? What is she? What is her name? How much money has she? Above all, is she pretty?"

"She is the Countess de Venetza," I replied. "Italian, I should say; rich—since she has taken Wiltshire House; and as for her personal appearance—well, when you see her, you will be able to judge of that for yourselves."

"Excellent!" said the Guardsman. "I prefer Manderville's report to yours, Paunceford. Is she married?"

"A widow, I fancy," I replied.

"Still better! If she is kind to me I will make her reputation, and Wiltshire House shall be the smartest caravansérai in London. Not shooting in your wood, Manderville, I hope?"

"I wish to goodness you men wouldn't spend your time so much in inventing new slang," I answered. "But some of you seem to have nothing else to do. Now that I have satisfied your curiosity, I shall go home to bed. The early bird catches the early news. In these days one lives for the morning papers."

Paunceford saw another opportunity.

"Talking of morning papers——" he began; but before he had finished the sentence I had left the room.

Being tired when I reached home I went straight to bed. Remembering my experience of the previous night, I was determined that this one should make up for it. To my disappointment, however, I discovered that, tired though I was, sleep would not visit my eyelids. I was as wide awake when I had been two hours in bed as I was when I entered my room. Once more, as on the previous night, I was haunted with the remembrance of the Countess's eyes; do what I would, I could not get them out of my mind.

Tired at last of tumbling and tossing, and thoroughly angry with myself, and the world in general, I rose, donned a dressing-gown, and went into the small study that adjoins my bedroom. The fire was not quite extinguished, and with some little coaxing I was able to induce it to burn again. Taking a book I drew up my chair, seated myself in it, and tried to read. I must have done so to some purpose, for after a time I fell asleep. Possibly it may have been due to the fact that I had had no rest on the previous night, and that my mind was naturally much occupied with the gravity of England's situation, and the part I had to play in the coming strife; at any rate, my dreams were not only vivid but decidedly alarming. I dreamt that I was in a transport *en route* to the Cape, and that the vessel struck a rock, and sank with all the troops on board. There was no time to get out the boats, and, in company with some hundreds of others, I was precipitated into the water. While we were still struggling with the waves, a life-boat made her appearance, and, to my intense astonishment, standing in the bows was no less a person than the Countess De Venetza. What was stranger still, she carried in her hand a

heavy spear, or harpoon, with which, whenever a drowning man approached the boat, she stabbed him in the back, laughing as she did so. Then, by means of that wonderful mechanical ingenuity with which the theatres of the land of dreams are furnished, the scene changed to a lonely plain at the foot of a rugged mountain-range. A battle had been fought upon it, and the dead and wounded still lay where they had fallen. So real did it appear to me, that when I recognised here and there the faces of friends, I found myself wondering what I should say to their loved ones when I returned to England. Suddenly, in the weird light, for the moon was shining above the mountain-peaks, there appeared from among the rocks on the further side of the plain a woman, whose face I instantly recognised. With stealthy steps she left her hiding-place and descended to where the wounded lay thickest. In her hand she carried the same spear that I remembered in my previous dream, and with it she stabbed every man who remained alive. So terrible was the expression upon her face as she did so, that I turned away from her in loathing and disgust. When I looked again she was bending over the body of a man who still lived, but who was bleeding

from a deep wound in his side. Picture my consternation when I discovered that he was none other than the Guardsman who had been so persistent in his inquiries that night concerning her. As I watched, for I was unable to move hand or foot to save him, a low moan escaped his lips, followed by an appeal for water. With the same expression of fiendish rage upon her face that I had noticed before, she raised the spear, and was about to plunge it into his breast, when with a cry I awoke, to find the sun streaming into the room, and my respectable Williams standing before me.

"Good gracious, Williams, how you startled me!" I said. "What on earth am I doing here? Ah, I remember! I could not sleep, so I came in to get a book. I suppose I must have fallen asleep over it. What news is there this morning?"

There was an air of mystery about Williams that I knew heralded the announcement of some extraordinary information.

"Yes, sir," he said, "there is some important news. The papers do say that 'War is declared.'"

CHAPTER III

DURING the week which followed my return to London, events followed thick and fast upon each other. The now famous Ultimatum issued by the enemy, though surprising enough at the time, was not altogether unexpected. Its presumptuous tone, however, was the cause of general comment. As a matter of fact, it was not until it became known that the enemy, instead of waiting to be attacked in their own territory, had invaded that of Her Majesty the Queen, that the first feeling of amazement changed to one of anger, and, if the truth must be told, to one of no little anxiety. Our Force at the front was well known to be inadequate, and, as we had the best of reasons for being aware, a considerable time would have to elapse before it would be possible for it to be supplemented.

In my new capacity as a member of the Cabinet, my knowledge of the country in which

we were about to fight stood me in good stead; consequently, I was kept busily employed after my return to England. The situation, as I have already said, was one of considerable anxiety, but as soon as it was announced that that popular soldier, Sir William Woller, had been selected to proceed to the South, in order to take up the Chief Command, the public fears were in a great measure allayed. With perhaps but three exceptions, no more popular choice could have been made, and I do not think I am breaking faith with my colleagues when I say that we were all agreed upon this point. The decision was arrived at on Wednesday afternoon, and orders were issued that the General in question should sail from Southampton on the following Saturday. On the Friday morning he was to be present at an important Council at the War Office; in the afternoon he was to be received in Audience at Windsor, and at eleven o'clock on Saturday morning he was due to leave Waterloo for Southampton Docks.

Now, Woller and I had been friends for many years, and immediately his appointment was made known, I hastened to write him a letter of congratulation. In it I said that if he should have sufficient time at his disposal to

allow me a chance of seeing him, before he left London, I should like to shake him by the hand and wish him God-speed. He replied to the effect that he would be dining with the Commander-in-Chief on Friday evening, and informed me that I was to be one of the party. In confirmation of this the next post brought me an invitation which I hastened to accept.

In due course Friday evening arrived, and the appointed hour found me at the Commander-in-Chief's residence in Bruton Street. I had already been informed that it was to be quite a small and friendly affair—as a matter of fact, the guest of the evening, myself, and two other friends, constituted the party. I was the first to arrive, Sir George Brandon followed me, Berkeley Burroughes came next, and as soon as he had put in an appearance, we only required Woller to make the number complete. He was late, however. Eight o'clock struck, and still there was no sign of him. Our host, in apologising for the delay, reminded us that, owing to the multitudinous claims upon Sir William's time, it might be impossible for him to avoid being just a little late. When, however, the clock upon the mantel-piece stood at half-past eight, we began to look at each other and to wonder what could have become of him.

At last the Commander-in-Chief was unable to bear the suspense any longer.

"If you will excuse me," he said, "I will telephone to his house, and find out at what time he left there. Woller is such a punctual man that this delay is, to say the least of it, extraordinary."

He left the room, and during his absence we kept up that desultory kind of conversation with which one endeavours to cover the uneasiness caused by the non-arrival of an anticipated guest. A few moments later the Commander-in-Chief returned with a puzzled expression upon his face.

"It becomes more inexplicable every minute," said he. "From what I can gather Woller has not been seen at his house since he left it for Windsor. It is really most singular, and I am at a loss to know what construction to put upon it. However, if you have no objection, we will give him another quarter of an hour's grace, and if he is not here then, go into dinner."

We waited the allotted time with what patience we could command, and when it had expired, left the drawing-room and proceeded to the dining-room, where we sat down to the long-delayed meal.

I cannot pretend for a moment that the

meal was a success. The non-appearance of our old friend, the man who on the morrow was to leave England on one of the most important errands she has ever intrusted to a son, sat like a wet blanket upon us. If at the last moment he had been prevented from coming, how was it that he had not sent a note of apology and explanation to his host? Had he met with an accident, or been taken suddenly ill, he would at least have given instructions that a telegram should be sent. Woller, as we were well aware, was the pink of politeness; he was also a strict disciplinarian, not only of others, but also of himself. That he would, therefore, have treated with discourtesy a man who besides being his senior officer was also his old friend, was the most unlikely thing in the world. There were special reasons that prevented us discussing the matter in all its bearings just then, but that we were all equally disquieted by his absence was quite certain. I was the first to leave the house, and I can remember that it was exactly a quarter past eleven when the front door closed behind me. Up to that moment no word of apology, excuse, or explanation had been received from the missing man.

"It's just possible that I may find a message from him awaiting me when I reach home," I said to myself as I took my place in my brougham.

I was destined to be disappointed, however. There were several letters and two telegrams lying upon my table, but not one of any sort from Woller.

"Are you quite sure that no messenger has called from Sir William Woller?" I asked Williams, when he came to my dressing-room, a quarter of an hour later.

"No, sir, I am quite sure of that," he replied; "had any one called I should have been informed of it."

With that assurance I was perforce compelled to be content. I can give you my word, however, that I was by no means easy in my mind concerning Sir William's silence.

Next morning, when I was in the middle of my breakfast, a note was handed me from the Commander-in-Chief. It ran as follows:—

"DEAR MANDERVILLE,—Could you spare me ten minutes as soon as possible after your receipt of this? I would call upon you myself, but for various reasons, which I will explain to you when I see you, I am unable to leave the house until I go down to Pall Mall."

Here followed an assurance that the writer was very truly mine, his signature, and a postscript to the effect that the bearer would wait for an answer. I scribbled a hasty reply, saying that I would come round to Bruton Street at once, and as soon as I had made my toilet, called a cab and set off. On my arrival there I was shown direct to the Commander-in-Chief's study, where I found him awaiting my coming with considerable impatience.

"It is very good of you to come so promptly," he said. "To tell you the truth, I am very uneasy, and as we are both old friends of the man, I thought I would consult you in an *ex-officio* capacity, before going to the Secretary of State for War."

"I am to gather from this, I suppose, that up to the present, you have not heard anything of Woller," I answered, with a little sinking of the heart, for I made sure that morning would dispel the mystery that enveloped his behaviour.

"You have guessed correctly," he said. "I have caused the most careful enquiries to be made, and have learnt that he left Windsor by the 3.25 train, reached Paddington at 4.2, entered a cab there, and has

not since been heard of. Unfortunately, as nobody seems to have been aware of his identity, the number of the cab was not taken, and, so far as we are able to ascertain, none of the drivers in the station-yard at the time appear to be able to recollect whose vehicle it was that he employed. If you reflect that it has been arranged that he shall leave London for Southampton at eleven o'clock this morning, and that an enormous crowd will be at the station to see him off, it will at once become evident to you that his non-appearance will be far from making a good impression upon the public mind."

"But what has become of him? He can't have vanished into space."

"There are many other ways in which he might disappear," said my companion gloomily.

"Surely you don't suppose he has been the victim of foul play?"

I put the question hesitatingly, for I knew the thoughts that were in my own mind.

"I scarcely know what to think," the other replied. "I can only confess that I am alarmed, seriously alarmed, by his prolonged absence. Woller, as you know, is a man who realises to the full the responsibilities entailed

by his present position. Duty with him is more than duty, it is a matter of life and death; he knows that the eyes of England, of Europe, and I might even say of the whole world, are upon him, and for that reason alone I feel sure he would not cause us so much anxiety of his own free will."

"In that case, what do you intend doing?" I enquired, for I could well foresee the terrible trouble to which the situation would give rise. "It is now a quarter to ten, and in little more than an hour he will be expected at Waterloo. If the crowd don't see him they will begin to wonder, the man in the street will begin to talk, the newspapers will take up the tale, and in a few hours we shall have entered on a new phase of the situation."

The Commander-in-Chief rose and began to pace the room.

"I have already sent a special messenger with a letter to the Secretary of State," he replied. "In it I have told him what I fear and also what I have done. I shall consult the various heads of Departments as soon as I reach Pall Mall, on the bare chance that one of them may be able to elucidate the mystery.

"At the same time I should communicate

with the railway authorities, if I were you," I continued. "I should inform them that, owing to the fact of his being detained by matters of the greatest importance, it is possible that Woller may not be able to travel by that particular train."

"That is a good idea," the Commander-in-Chief replied; "I will act upon it at once. In the event of our receiving no news, that should be sufficient to give us time to arrange some other plan. It will mean delaying the vessel at Southampton, however, and—good gracious me!—what a pile of difficulties it will land us in! The Colonial Secretary must be informed, and the matter must come before the Cabinet. As you said just now, if by any chance it should leak out and the Press get hold of it, there is no telling where it will end."

"You have communicated with Scotland Yard, of course?"

"I sent a messenger to them shortly after midnight, that is to say, as soon as I had found out that Woller had left Windsor, and that he had not been to his Club, or to his own house. Their best men are at work upon it, but so far without any satisfactory result."

"And can his own servants throw any light upon the matter?"

"None whatever!" the Commander-in Chief replied. "When he left for Windsor he informed them he should be back early, in order to dress for my dinner in the evening. They say he appeared to be in the best of health and spirits, and seemed greatly pleased with the arrangements made for his journey to-day. Lord Laverstock accompanied him from the Castle, and was the last to speak to him at Windsor Station. From the conversation I have had with him by telephone, I gathered that Woller was looking forward to his dinner with us last night. The guard of the train corroborates the fact that he travelled to Paddington. For the reason that the Railway Authorities expected him by the next train, there was no crowd upon the platform to witness his arrival. On alighting he simply called a cab and drove away. After that he vanishes completely."

"There is no way, I suppose, in which we can make further enquiries concerning him?"

"There is nothing so far as I can see. We are doing all that is possible, but our position in the meantime is a most anxious and unpleasant one. Now I shall hasten along to see the Secretary of State for War, and hear what he thinks of the situation. He will

doubtless consider it necessary to call an immediate meeting of the Council, when the situation can be discussed in all its bearings."

"Let us hope that he may be heard of before very long," I replied.

So saying I left him and drove home again, feeling sadly upset by the untoward turn events had taken. What could have become of poor Woller? Had he been decoyed into some slum and murdered? A hundred fears for his safety assailed me, each one equally probable and equally cruel.

When I reached my house I found that the letters had arrived, and were spread out upon my study table. Still thinking of Woller, I opened the envelopes and scanned their contents. One was larger than the others, and on opening it I found that it contained a card, upon which the following words were printed :—

"The Countess de Venetza at Home on Wednesday, November the 21st, from nine until eleven o'clock."

In the bottom left-hand corner was the address, "Wiltshire House."

As I stood with the card in my hand, the memory of my first meeting with the Countess came back to me. So rapidly had events

moved of late, that it seemed as if a year had elapsed since I had last seen her. I recalled the impression her dark haunting eyes had made upon me, and, discourteous though it may be to say so, I must confess that a shudder passed over me at the recollection. I placed the card upon my mantel-piece, and, for the time being, thought no more about it. There were other and more weighty matters than an invitation from a pretty woman to be considered that day.

Every one who has followed the progress of the war — and there are few who have not — will recall the wave of consternation and dismay that swept over England when the news became known that Sir William Woller, the newly-appointed Commander-in-Chief for South Africa, had disappeared, and could not be found. A thousand rumours, all of them equally sensational, and all equally wide of the mark, flew about the country ; but despite the efforts of the police, the jibes of the Press, the scarcely veiled sneers of Little Englanders and the openly-expressed contempt of our Continental neighbours, not a trace of the missing man could be discovered. A meeting of the Cabinet was immediately summoned, with the result that General Grey-Mortimer, a

gallant gentleman and an experienced soldier, was at once despatched to the front, in temporary command. In the meantime, the wildest excitement prevailed in England. Transports were leaving the various ports every day, the Reservists were called up, the Militia and Volunteers were being equipped and drilled, if necessary, for active service. Plainly the heart of the country was stirred to the very centre of its being.

Such was the Public Temper at the time that few entertainments were given by Society. Such as there were, and to which I was invited, I, for the most part, declined. An exception was made, however, where the Countess de Venetza was concerned. The temptation to see her play the part of a hostess was more than I could resist, and for this reason, ten o'clock on the night set forth upon her card found me mounting the magnificent staircase of Wiltshire House. From the number of arrivals and the crowding of the stairs, it was plain, despite the excitement of that period, that her "At Home" was likely to be a crowded one. Her beauty, her wealth, the fact that she was for the time being the possessor of Wiltshire House, her famous team of black

Orloffs, behind which she drove in the Park, had combined to make her one of the year's sensations. The grandeur of her entertainments had quickly become proverbial, and in consequence, to admit that one had not the *entrée* to Wiltshire House, was to argue oneself unknown. Ascending the staircase by my side, cool, calm and collected, as if the enormous weight of responsibility he was then carrying were of no account, was no less a person than the Colonial Secretary. When the history of the century, and of this war in particular, shall come to be written, the character of the Honourable Benjamin Castellan will shine prominently out. The possessor of a serene imperturbability that nothing could disturb, a keen observer, a born leader of men, and boasting that most necessary of all qualifications, a firm belief in himself, a better man for the arduous post he occupied could not have been discovered.

"I was not aware that you knew the Countess," I said, as we climbed the stairs together.

"Nor did I that until a few days ago," he answered. "May I ask where you made her acquaintance?"

"In Paris," I replied. "We stayed at the

WE WERE RECEIVED BY THE COUNTESS.

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same hotel. She and her father had just returned from a yachting trip in the Mediterranean with the Duke of Rotherhithe."

Now, I am sorry to have to confess it, but that little speech of mine was destined to work an incalculable amount of harm. Castellan has confessed to me since that he was at first inclined to be somewhat distrustful of the Countess. When I informed him, however, that our hostess had been the guest of such a well-known personage as the Duke of Rotherhithe she figured in his eyes in a different light, with what result you shall presently hear.

On the broad landing at the head of the staircase we were received by the Countess. A more beautiful figure than she presented at that moment it would have been difficult to find. Perfectly dressed, carrying herself with a graceful assurance as to the manner born, she made an ideal hostess. If further evidence of her wealth were wanting, it might have been found in the magnificent diamond tiara she wore upon her head, in the broad collet of the same precious stones about her neck, and in the beautiful bracelets that encircled her wrists. Only once before could I recall such a display, and then the wearer was an

Emperor's escort. As you may remember, when I first saw her in Paris, it had struck me that her attire was just one little point behind the "prevailing mode." Now, however, it was as near perfection as it was possible for human hands to make it. She greeted Castellan first.

"It is indeed kind of you, Mr Castellan, to come to me when every moment of your time is of such value," she said, as she shook hands with him. "I follow your doings with the greatest eagerness, and marvel that you should have the strength to accomplish so much."

"Have you ever discovered that stress of work promotes growth of power," said the Colonial Secretary. Then, with one of his inscrutable smiles, he added: "Pardon me, Countess, I had forgotten for the moment that your power does not depend upon your work!"

"Ah! I fear you intend a compliment," returned the lady with a smile. "Must it remain for a foreigner to remind you of your own Milton?

> 'What is strength without a double share
> Of wisdom? vast, unwieldly, burdensome,
> Proudly secure, yet liable to fall
> By weakest subtilities; not made to rule,
> But to subserve where wisdom bears command.'"

It was not difficult to see that the aptness of the quotation astonished the Colonial Secretary. The purity of the Countess's English was also a surprise to me; but for certain unmistakable indications it would not have been thought that she was a foreigner. When Castellan had passed on his way, she turned to me with a little gesture, as if she were pleased to welcome an old friend.

"Ah! Sir George," she said, "I am so pleased to see you. But I think I should give you a scolding for not having been before."

I hastened to excuse myself on the plea of over-work, and, having obtained forgiveness and promised to amend my conduct in the future, I passed on to shake hands with her father. When I had been again thanked for my kindness in the matter of the French train, I followed the Colonial Secretary into the ball-room. I had not been there many minutes before I was greeted by a voice, which I instantly recognised, saying: "How do you do, Sir George," and turning, I found myself face to face with the handsome young Count Reiffenburg, Madame's cousin.

"And how do you like London?" I enquired, after the usual polite salutations had

passed between us. "I think I understood you to say, on the occasion of our crossing from Paris, that this was your first visit?"

"I like it very much," he replied, "but, to be candid, not so much as Paris. I trust that is not a rude thing to say in London?"

"Every one is entitled to express his own opinion," I answered, somewhat coldly, for I had taken an instinctive dislike to this young fellow. "You must remember that you are seeing England at her worst just now. The times are too anxious for us to be very gay."

"You refer to the war, I suppose?" he answered. Then he added with what I could not help thinking was intended for a sneer: "The war is the sensation of the moment."

"It naturally would be," I replied. "Though proverbially phlegmatic, we still have sufficient feeling left to be patriotic; but perhaps your sympathies are with the other side?"

"One can scarcely help feeling some sympathy——"

"My dear Conrad," said the Countess, who had come upon us unperceived, "I really cannot let you talk politics in my ball-room. Go away and find your partner at once. Prove to her that you have learned to valse in Vienna."

She tapped him playfully on the arm with her fan, but for my own part I could not help thinking that her words were not meant to be taken as lightly as she had spoken them. At any rate, the young man muttered something under his breath and left us."

"Conrad is a foolish but a warm-hearted boy," said the Countess, looking after him. "Because Messieurs les Boers don't wear uniforms, and are not nice to look at, he calls them patriots fighting for their country, and honours them as such."

"I fear there are many like him," I replied. "I trust, however, Countess, that we have the good fortune to possess your sympathy?"

"Could any one help sympathising with the handsome British officers?" she answered. "I have no doubt——"

At that moment a sudden buzz of excitement ran through the room, and she stopped without completing her sentence. It began near the door, and quickly spread from group to group. Whatever the news was, it caused a look of consternation to appear on every face.

"What can be the matter?" asked the Countess. "I wonder what they are all talking about?"

As she finished speaking the Colonial Secretary came up to us.

"I hope that you are not the bearer of evil tidings," said my companion to him. At the same moment I noticed that her face was very white, and that there was a frightened look in her eyes.

"We have just received terrible intelligence," he replied. "The steamer, *Sultan of Sedang*, with Sir Grey-Mortimer, his staff, and the first Midlandshire Regiment on board, has been blown up at Madeira, and only three men saved."

The shock was so terrible, that for a moment I stood as if tongue-tied.

"And Grey-Mortimer?" I asked, when I could speak.

"Killed," was the reply.

"Good Heavens! how terrible!" I said. "Are you quite sure it is true? How did you hear the news?"

"A message has just reached me from the Office," he replied. "There can be no doubt about it!"

"Woller first, now Grey-Mortimer," I said to myself. "What can it mean? I shall go to the Admiralty and obtain full particulars."

"I will accompany you," said the Colonial

Secretary. "Good-night, Countess, and many thanks for your hospitality. I am sorry indeed that this news should have reached us at such a time."

"And I too," she answered. Then, turning to me, she continued: "I hope you will come and see me again, Sir George?"

As she said it, she looked into my face with a glance that would have set many hearts, less susceptible than mine, beating with unusual vigour. The memory of that look accompanied me down the stairs and remained with me for some time after I was seated in the Colonial Secretary's brougham. Then we set off to the Admiralty to learn the details of the disaster. Alas! as Castellan had said, it proved only too true. The steamship *Sultan of Sedang* had reached Madeira safely, and had anchored in the Bay. Nothing of a suspicious nature occurred, nor was any boat seen near the ship after dark. Suddenly a terrific explosion was heard, and the great vessel was blown to pieces, the only men who escaped with their lives being a stoker, a sergeant in the Midlandshire regiment, and an officer's servant. At the time of telegraphing, boats were out searching the Bay, while the most careful investigation

as to the cause of the disaster was proceeding on shore. The Colonial Secretary and I left the Admiralty when we had heard all there was to be told, and proceeded into the street once more. The coachman had been ordered not to wait, as we had decided to walk on home.

Late as the hour was the alarming intelligence had spread like wildfire through London, and already a considerable crowd had collected in Whitehall. Fortunately, Castellan and I were able to slip out unrecognised, and then we set off in the direction of Trafalgar Square. The Colonial Secretary's residence, as all the world is aware, is in Carlton House Terrace. At the corner of the small thoroughfare that winds its way from Cockspur Street into Carlton House Terrace, we stopped, and stood for some moments conversing there together. Then we wished each other good-night, Castellan going down the narrow street of which I have spoken, while I proceeded along Pall Mall and Piccadilly in the direction of my own abode. My thoughts were the reverse of pleasant as I strode along. A Cabinet Council had been summoned for the following morning, and, with this sad intelligence to be brought before it, there could be

no doubt that it was likely to be a gloomy one.

Next morning I rose early. I had a large amount of work to get through before the meeting, which was to take place at eleven o'clock. At a quarter to that hour I drove down to Whitehall, and made my way to the Foreign Office.

"This is terrible news indeed, Manderville," said the Prime Minister, as we shook hands. "Poor Grey-Mortimer and all those gallant men! I scarcely like to think of the effect it will produce upon the country. First, that succession of disastrous defeats, then Woller's extraordinary disappearance, and now this new catastrophe. However, as we shall have to discuss that directly, I will say no more at present. Are we all here?"

There was only one person who had not arrived, the Colonial Secretary.

"It's not like Castellan to be unpunctual," said the Prime Minister. "Doubtless, however, it won't be long before he puts in an appearance."

When ten minutes had elapsed and still he did not come, a messenger was despatched to the Colonial Office in search of him. It was not long before he returned with the informa-

tion that Castellan had not yet arrived at his office. Close upon the heels of this message came another from Mrs Castellan anxiously inquiring for her husband, who, it appeared, had not come home on the previous night, nor had any communication been received from him. As I heard this a great fear took possession of me. I had said good-night to him in Cockspur Street, only a few paces from his own front door, and had seen him walk in that direction. How was it, then, that he had not reached it? Was he the victim of a plot? Had he disappeared like Woller, never to be heard of again?

CHAPTER IV

SOME idea of the wave of consternation which swept over England, when it became known that the Right Honourable Benjamin Castellan, Secretary of State for the Colonies had disappeared as mysteriously as Sir William Woller had done before him, will be derived when I say that edition after edition of the evening papers had been sold by three o'clock in the afternoon. It was in every sense a grave national calamity, for, as we all know, at this particular juncture in the country's history, Benjamin Castellan, of all others, was the man who could least be spared.

"You are sure, I suppose, Sir George, that Castellan intended going home after you parted in Cockspur Street," the Prime Minister enquired, looking at me along the table.

"As certain as I am of anything," I replied. "He complained of feeling tired, and laugh-

ingly declared his intention of going to bed early, in order that he might be fresh for our meeting this morning."

"He did not seem depressed in any way, I suppose?" put in the First Lord of the Admiralty.

"He was naturally extremely downcast by the news we had received concerning the *Sultan of Sedang*, but in no other sense," I answered. "I am sorry now that I did not walk with him to his door as I originally intended doing."

"It is, perhaps, as well that you did not," asserted one of the others, "for in that case we might have lost you too. Surely my Lord," he continued, addressing the Prime Minister, "the Police Authorities should be able to obtain some clue respecting his disappearance? Deserted as the passage usually is at that hour of the night, for I have passed through it myself, there *must* have been some one in the main thoroughfares at either end who would have given the alarm had they noticed anything out of the common."

"It is not altogether certain that the crime, if crime it is—and of that we have as yet no evidence—was perpetrated in the passage of which you speak," said the Prime Minister;

"but wherever, or however, the deed was committed, the Police I am sure will do their utmost to unravel the mystery. The mere fact that General Woller's disappearance has not yet been accounted for is giving rise to a vast amount of uneasiness. That the same fate should have befallen Mr Castellan will not be likely to add to the public peace of mind. I am sure the Secretary of State for the Home Department will do all that lies in his power to see that no time is lost in bringing the offenders to justice."

When the meeting broke up I made my way with all haste to Carlton House Terrace, in order to assure my friend's wife of my sympathy, and to help her in any way that lay in my power. Prostrated with grief though she was, she consented to see me, and I was accordingly admitted to her presence.

"Oh, Sir George!" she cried, hastening forward to greet me, "is it possible that you bring news of him? Ah! I can see you do not."

She threw herself into a chair with a little cry of despair, and for a moment I scarcely knew what to say to comfort her.

"We must hope for the best, Mrs Castellan,"

I said at last, and then added with an assurance that my heart was far from sharing—"no one knows what the next few hours may bring forth."

"But where can he be?" she cried—"and who can have been base enough to harm him? I know that he has enemies, as every man who has made a great name for himself must have, but I cannot think of one who would go so far as to rob me of him. Oh! it is too cruel! too cruel!"

We were still talking when news reached us that two members of the Police Department had arrived, and were anxious for an interview.

"I cannot see them," the poor lady declared. "I can tell them nothing that they do not know!"

"Then let me see them for you," I said. "I think I can answer any questions they may ask, and at the same time it will spare you the pain such an interview would entail."

"God bless you for your kindness! You are a true friend."

I thereupon left her, and followed my colleague's secretary along the hall in the direction of the study.

"This is a sad affair indeed, Mr Gedge,"

I said, after we had left the morning-room. "I presume you have never heard Mr Castellan say anything as to his being shadowed by any one?"

"Never," he replied; "though I will confess that I have suggested to him on numerous occasions the advisability of having a companion with him when he walked home late at night from the House. That, you remember, was a favourite habit of his. He used to say that the fresh air revived him after a long debate."

"And he was quite right," I replied. "Now let us hear what the police have to say."

The two members of the Detective Force, who had been detailed to take charge of the case, rose as we entered the room. They seemed somewhat surprised at seeing me, but upon my informing them how I came to be connected with the matter, willingly excused Mrs Castellan from attendance.

"Do I understand you to say that you were the last of his friends to see Mr Castellan before his disappearance?" asked the taller of the two men, who looked more like a burly Yorkshire farmer than a member of the Scotland Yard Detective Force.

"It would appear so," I replied. "We

left Wiltshire House on hearing the news of the disaster to the *Sultan of Sedang*, drove to the Admiralty to learn the latest particulars, and then, having dismissed the carriage, strolled as far as Cockspur Street in each other's company."

"And you parted at the passage that leads from Cockspur Street into Carlton House Terrace, I believe?" said the other man. "You did not happen to notice whether any person was following you, I suppose?"

"I don't fancy either of us looked round during the whole distance," I answered, with an inward wish that I had been suspicious enough to have taken that simple precaution. "We had too much to occupy our thoughts without observing the actions of other people."

"And how long did you remain on the pavement? I should be obliged if you would endeavour to be as accurate as possible, sir, in your answer to this question."

I considered a moment before I replied.

"Between eight and ten minutes I should say, certainly not more. I remember comparing my watch with a clock above the shop window at the corner, and remarking as I did so that I was nearly three minutes slow."

"In that case you should be able to fix

the time of his leaving you to within a minute or two," said the elder of the two men, taking a note-book and pencil from his pocket as he spoke.

"I can do so exactly. It was five minutes past twelve when we bade each other good-night."

"Was any one near you on the pavement while you were standing talking?"

"No one, the street was almost deserted."

"I notice that you say *almost* deserted, sir. Then there were other people in sight. Do you happen to remember if any one was standing near you—that is to say, within fifty feet or so?"

"I recollect that there was a policeman on the opposite side of the road. Two youths in evening dress, both far from sober, passed at the moment that we stopped. Stay, now I come to think of it, there was an old woman near us just before we said good-night to each other, and, if my memory serves me, she disappeared down the narrow passage. It is strange that I should have forgotten the circumstance."

"An old woman? Can you give me a rather more detailed description of her? Of what class was she?"

"Of the very poorest, I should say, and half witted. She was in rags, and was muttering some gibberish to herself. I am afraid I cannot tell you any more about her."

"That is rather a pity," said his companion. "I should like to have a little conversation with that good lady."

"You surely don't think she had anything to do with the Colonial Secretary's disappearance?" I replied with some surprise. "Why, she couldn't have had sufficient strength to harm a child, much less a strong, active man such as Mr Castellan was."

"Perhaps not, sir; it's just possible, however, that she may have had friends to do the work for her. I don't say, of course, that she *had* anything to do with it, but it is our duty to look after every detail, and my experience has taught me that the most unexpected places often provide the most likely clues. Let us suppose, for instance, that she was only the decoy bird, and that the real perpetrators of the crime were concealed in the passage. As soon as she had discovered Mr Castellan, she passed into the lane and bade her confederates be on the alert; then, when he appeared, they would be ready to effect his capture. Doesn't that plot seem feasible enough, sir?"

"Very feasible," I felt compelled to admit; "but your case, like the proverbial figures, can be made to prove anything. However, if you think the old woman had anything to do with it, what action do you propose to take?"

"I shall try the street first, and endeavour to discover whether any one heard a scuffle or cries for help last night. Then it's possible the police on the beat may know something of the old woman, and be able to give us an insight into her character and identity. In the meantime, if Mrs Castellan will permit it, I will interview the servants and endeavour to discover whether they noticed any suspicious characters loitering about near the house."

"I am sure Mrs Castellan will be only too pleased if you will do what you deem necessary," I replied.

The man thanked me, and the necessary orders were given for the servants to be ushered into the room. One by one they were subjected to a rigorous cross-examination at the hands of the two detectives. Neither the butler nor any of the men-servants had noticed anything suspicious in the front of the house, nor had they seen any old woman, answering to my description, hanging about the

premises. The housekeeper and cook were equally positive in their assertions; indeed, the only person who had noticed anything peculiar was a young housemaid, who declared that she had seen two well-dressed men pass the house on three different occasions during the day. Each time they used the small passage to which reference has been so often made. When pressed to describe them more accurately, she was unable to do so.

"They were just ordinary gentlemen," she said, "dressed in frock coats and silk hats, and they might have, or might not have, carried umbrellas in their hands." Further than this she declared she could not go, not if her life depended upon it.

"What makes you so sure that they passed three times?" asked the smaller of the two detectives.

"Because I saw them first after breakfast, sir," the girl replied, "then in the middle of the morning, and the last time just before dinner."

This being all that could be extracted from her, the girl was dismissed from the room, and Mr Castellan's valet was recalled. From him an exact description of the clothes the missing man was wearing, and a record of the

jewellery he had about his person, was obtained.

"This is no ordinary case of robbery," said the elder detective, "but it is always as well to know these things. One never knows how useful they may prove later on."

After asking a few more questions, they thanked me for the information I had given them and prepared to leave the house.

"You will be sure to acquaint Mrs Castellan with any discovery you may make?" I said. "I should like to be able to assure her of that?"

"You may, sir. She shall know directly we hear of anything."

Then they bowed themselves out, and I was at liberty to make my missing colleague's wife acquainted with the result of our interview. I found her still prostrated with grief and anxiety, a prey to the most agonising thoughts. I did what I could to comfort her, though I felt that my ministrations could do her no good. In my own heart I was quite certain that Castellan had been spirited away by the same mysterious agency that had deprived us of Woller. What that agency was, however, was more than I, or any one of us, could determine. When I left Carlton House Terrace

I drove to the Foreign Office, where I had a consultation with the Prime Minister which lasted upwards of an hour, after which I returned to my residence.

I had intended going into the country that afternoon, but, in the light of this new calamity, I changed my mind and resolved to remain in Town. Accordingly, after lunch I drove to my office, and remained there until towards evening. By three o'clock, as I have already said, the terrible intelligence was known all over the town. In all my experience I cannot remember a scene of greater excitement. Downing Street, in particular, was filled with an enormous crowd, eager to learn the latest news. In the public mind Castellan's disappearance figured as the work of an enemy, very probably by reason of the prominent part he had played in the history and development of the war. The wildest rumours were afloat concerning the affair, and every edition of the evening papers contained some new item connected with it. At four o'clock I bade my secretary telephone to Scotland Yard and enquire whether they had any information to impart. The reply was to the effect that their labours had so far been entirely fruitless. As in poor Woller's case, not a trace of the

missing man could be discovered. Castellan could not have vanished more completely had he been caught up to the sky at the very moment that I had said "good-bye" to him.

"It is really most uncomfortable for every one concerned," my secretary remarked. "If this sort of thing is to continue, one does not know who the next victim may be."

He was quite right; one certainly *did not* know. This much, however, was quite certain: whoever the persons might be who perpetrated the crime, they were past masters of their art. Their arrangements and the general conduct of the affair was perfection itself, and against such science it was almost impossible to guard. For my own part—and I don't think my worst enemies can accuse me of cowardice—I must confess to a distinct feeling of uneasiness when I reflected that this mysterious individual, or band, might possibly try his, or their, hand upon me. The suggestion emanating from Scotland Yard to the effect that we should avail ourselves of the offer of police protection, I politely, but firmly declined. The idea of being shadowed night and day by detectives was more than distasteful to me.

"Yet we do not desire to lose you, Sir George," said the Prime Minister later, and in saying it he was kind enough to pay me a compliment which my modesty will not permit me to repeat here. I owe him an apology in this matter, however, for I now see that he was right. If I should have to go through it all again, however, I feel that I should act as I did then.

At half-past four o'clock I left the office —by the back door this time, for I had no desire to be recognised by the crowd—and when I had crossed the Horse Guards Parade, set off in the direction of Marlborough House. As I walked along I thought of Castellan and of our meeting on the previous night. How little he had dreamt when he had carried on his airy badinage with Madame de Venetza that in less than three hours he would be gone from the sight of men! This naturally led me to think of the Countess. I recalled the expression upon her face, and the look in her eyes, when she had invited me to visit her again, and though, as I have said before, I do not in any way consider myself a lady's man, I am willing to confess that the recollection of her condescension gave me considerable satisfaction.

Not feeling in the humour for Piccadilly, and the raucous voices of the newsboys shouting—

"DISAPPEARANCE OF THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR THE COLONIES:

DISAPPEARANCE OF MR CASTELLAN!"

I continued my walk across the green Park in the direction of Hyde Park Corner. It was a beautiful evening, and in the twilight the Park presented as peaceful a scene as the soul of man could desire. Reaching the exit opposite Hamilton Place, I stood for a moment wondering whether I should cross into Hyde Park or stroll leisurely home. What it was I cannot say, but for some reason or another I had a strange desire for the companionship of my fellow men or women. It may have been that the sudden disappearance of Castellan had upset me more than I supposed. At any rate, I was far from being myself. As I stood there an idea struck me, and I wondered why it had not occurred to me before. What was there to prevent my visiting the Countess that evening? She had declared that she would be very glad to see me whenever I might call.

My mind was no sooner made up than I crossed the road and steered a course for Wiltshire House. On the way many friends would have stopped me had I permitted them to do so, but I strodė resolutely along, paying no heed to them beyond returning their salutations. At last I reached the Countess's house and learnt that she was not only at home but would receive visitors. I found her in her boudoir seated before a bright fire, though the day had been comparatively warm.

"It is kind indeed of you to take pity upon my loneliness, Sir George," she said, as she rose to receive me. "No one could be more welcome. I have been feeling so very sad this afternoon, and now your society will cheer me up."

"You have heard of Mr Castellan's disappearance, I suppose?" I remarked, as I seated myself in the chair she indicated. "It has shocked you as it has done all of us!"

"Have you any way of accounting for it?" she asked.

"None whatever," I replied. "The whole affair is shrouded in mystery. The police are unable to discover the faintest clue to work upon."

"It will have a very serious effect upon the

country, will it not?" she enquired. "He has played such a conspicuous part in politics of late!"

"He will be missed, I fear," I answered, and stopped there, for I had no desire to discuss current politics just then.

Putting the topics of the day on one side, we at last came to the duration of her stay in London.

"I scarcely know how long we shall remain," she said. "I fancy my father is growing tired of London already. The war is perhaps accountable for it, but England is too sad just now. I do not like sad places. I prefer the sun, the warmth, the glitter, and to have smiling faces about me. I am afraid I must be peculiarly constituted, for the least thing is sufficient to raise or depress me." Then suddenly brightening up, she continued: "But there; what a foolish hostess I am to talk to you in this fashion. I shall frighten you away, and then you will not come and see me any more. I have no desire to lose so good a friend."

Man of the world though I was, the compliment tickled my vanity, and I hastened to reply in a suitable fashion. Then I congratulated her upon the success which had

attended her "At Home" on the previous evening.

"In the matter of an 'At Home' it is not so very difficult to be successful," she replied. "One has only to give *carte blanche* to one's cook and house-steward, dress oneself in one's best, and stand at the head of the stairs to receive one's guests with a conventional smile upon one's face. A dinner is a somewhat more difficult affair, and there, I think, without vanity, I may justly pride myself upon my ability. A cosy little dinner for, let us say, not more than eight people, each to be most carefully selected. Will you make one of them?"

"I shall be delighted," I replied. "But may it not be a competition? My man has ambition. Why not let me try to equal your effort, even if I cannot excel it?"

"Try, by all means. And the prize?"

"The knowledge of success! What prize could be more worth winning?"

"It is settled then?" she returned. "We are each to give a dinner and to endeavour to outdo each other. I shall make my arrangements accordingly."

After that we drifted into a discussion upon books, pictures, and, by the natural transition

of things, came at last to music. On this subject she was as well informed as upon every other.

"It is my passion," she said in explanation. "My piano is the greatest treasure I possess. I could not live without it."

"I felt certain from the first that you were a musician," I replied. "I wonder if I could induce you to play to me?"

"I will do so with pleasure if you wish it?" she answered, and accordingly crossed the room to the corner where the piano stood. Prepared as I was to find her a good *pianiste*, I did not dream for a moment that her talent was so great. As it was, she fascinated me from the moment that her fingers touched the keys. In explanation I might here remark that I am particularly susceptible to music, and now, under her influence, I sat spell-bound. The work was Saint Saën's "Danse Macabre," and in her hands the fierce madness of that remarkable composition was brought out with more than its usual *diablerie*.

In order to understand what is to follow, it must be remembered that I was seated near the fire-place, and that her piano was at the further end of the room, so that, placed as I was, I could not see my hostess.

Having once felt the divine *afflatus*, she played on and on, without stopping to enquire whether I was tired, wandering from master to master as the fancy seized her. Such was the effect of the music upon me, that in a short time I became scarcely conscious of mundane affairs. A delicious languor was stealing over me, and little by little I felt my eyes closing. The music appeared to be growing gradually fainter, until it could scarcely be heard. I tried to rouse myself, but was unable to do so. At last, even the inclination to battle with the feeling of drowsiness left me, and I abandoned myself to my fate.

Whether I fell asleep and dreamt what I am about to describe, or whether the Countess, in the exercise of a deadly power which I feel convinced she possessed, had hypnotized me, I cannot say. The fact remains, that in my mind's eye, for my eyes were closed, I saw her rise from the instrument and approach me. Then, she came closer, stopped, and stooped over me until her eyes were close to mine. There was a light in them that pierced my eyelids and penetrated to the centre of my brain.

"It is useless for you to strive with me,"

she said; "you are mine, and must do my bidding."

Then she began to question me on certain matters connected with the war and with European politics. I appeared to be telling her secrets, so vital in their importance, that to have breathed them aloud to the world would have been to run the risk of causing the most serious international complications. Yet, still powerless to resist, I answered the questions as they were put to me, keeping nothing back. When she had learnt all that she wanted to know, she moved away from me, and returned to the piano. Then once more she began to play, the music growing louder and more distinct as it progressed. Then I woke, to find her still playing the same piece as when I had closed my eyes. When she had finished it, she rose from her seat.

"I think of all the great masters, I prefer Chopin," she said, as she crossed the room. "Yes, I am certain that he stands first in my admiration."

Her manner was so open, so sincere, that the suspicion I had been tempted to entertain against her vanished in a trice. It was all imagination, I told myself. Under the influence of her music I must have fallen asleep and

dreamt it all. Had I not good proof of this? Had it really happened, it would have taken nearly a quarter of an hour for me to impart the information she had asked of me. Yet the long hand of the clock upon the mantel-piece had only advanced three minutes since I had last looked at it. How comforting this assurance was to me I must leave you to understand. It was the most singularly vivid dream, however, I had had in my life, and, but for the evidence of the clock, and the sincerity of the Countess's manner, I could have sworn that the incident I have just described had really occurred. Yet there was another side to the question. I had fallen asleep while paying an afternoon call, and the idea disquieted me more than I cared to admit. Then a servant entered with tea, and under the influence of the Countess's Pekoe and fashionable chit-chat my powers of conversation returned to me. At last I rose to take leave.

"I fear I have paid you an unconscionably long visit," I said. "Your beautiful music, however, must be blamed for my over-stepping the bounds of politeness. I hope you will forgive me?"

"It has been a pleasure to me to play to

you," she answered. "One does not always have such a sympathetic audience."

With that I left her, and on reaching the street turned in the direction of the Park.

"I should have just time enough for a sharp walk before I dress," I said to myself, and took my watch from my pocket and glanced at the dial. The clock on the mantelpiece of the Countess's boudoir, when I had said good-bye to her, had pointed to half-past five. My watch showed a quarter to six. This was very singular, for I remembered looking at my watch as I stood in the portico, after ringing the bell, and also my laughing remark to the Countess to the effect that I was glad to have found her at home at such an hour, glancing at the clock as I did so. Yet now there was a difference of rather more than a quarter of an hour between the two? What did this signify? Could the Countess's clock have stopped while she was playing and then have gone on again of its own accord? It was scarcely likely that, while I was asleep, she had risen from the piano and had set it going, for going it certainly was when I bade her good-bye. The remembrance of the dream I had had still weighed heavily upon my mind, and, do what I would, I could

not throw it off. Yet how absurd it was. Moreover, though I had more than once suspected her of taking an interest in European politics, she had always denied the fact to me. Besides, even if this were so, and granted that she had the power, what reason could she possibly have had for extracting secrets from me? At this point the remembrance of her eyes and the singular influence they had had over me in Paris, returned to me.

"What does it all mean?" I asked myself, as if in despair of arriving at a definite conclusion.

I was to find that out, however, in good time!

CHAPTER V

YOU will remember that in the preceding chapter I described to you the conflicting emotions with which I viewed my now famous call at Wiltshire House. Beyond remarking that I was quite at a loss to account for it, and that the passing of time did not throw any further light upon the mystery, I need say no more about it. There is so much to tell of vital importance, that it behoves me to be economical of space. Needless to say, the Colonial Secretary's disappearance continued to attract its full measure of public attention. Despite the endeavours of the police, however, no clue of any sort could be discovered, either as to his present whereabouts, or as to the manner of his departure. Enormous rewards were offered, but without success. He was gone, and that was all that could be said about it.

Meanwhile, the most alarming telegrams were being received from the Front. Day

after day the news of reverses filled the columns of the Public Press, until it began to look as if the prestige of England would be destroyed for ever and a day. Parliament had by this time assembled, and questions innumerable were addressed to the Secretary of State for War as to the reasons for the deplorable condition of affairs at the Front. Public opinion was at fever heat, and only a small spark was needed to bring about an explosion. Troops were pouring out of England by every available boat, while the Home Defence Force was being increased to its utmost limit. Never since the Crimea had such a state of affairs been known, and never had the resources of the Empire been so severely taxed. Then came the news of the loss of another transport at sea, a catastrophe ascribed to the presence on board of a clock-work infernal machine; this was followed by the stranding of the *Son of Neptune*, with the 36th Lancers on board, at Las Palmas, by which the horses and men, so badly needed at the seat of war, were detained on the Island inactive until another vessel could be sent from England to pick them up and convey them to their destination.

By this time every one, save those whom

the most visible proof would not convince, had arrived at the conclusion that we were fighting, not only our ostensible and declared enemies, the two South African Republics, but also another powerful yet mysterious foe, whose machinations were responsible for the disappearance of Woller and the Colonial Secretary, for the blowing up of the *Sultan of Sedang*, the destruction of the *Son of Neptune*, and sundry other occurrences so vividly and painfully impressed upon the public mind. Then, for upwards of a fortnight, a respite was given us, and the British taxpayer was able to take up his paper without finding the news of some new misfortune, for which he would eventually be called upon to pay for both in money and self-esteem, described in its columns. It was fortunate that we could not foretell the even greater troubles that were still in store for us.

One memorable Friday morning, exactly a fortnight after my call at Wiltshire House, a rumour ran through the town to the effect that Woolwich Arsenal had been destroyed. Knowing the precautions that were taken at that splendid institution to guard against such a thing, the report was at first discredited. It was soon found, however, to be only too true.

A terrific explosion had taken place, a large number of employees had been killed and wounded, while the works, then so vitally necessary, were placed at a complete standstill. The lamentable occurrence was reported to the House by the Home Secretary that afternoon, and, as usual, the authorities declared there was no clue to guide the police in their search for the author of the dastardly deed. It was in vain that questions were asked in the House; in vain that public orators demanded of the authorities that they should exercise more care in guarding their institutions; in vain that the man in the street forwarded his theories, and suggested remedies, to the Press. England had a mysterious enemy who could think as well as act, and who, when he has finished his work, left no trace behind to lead to his identification.

In consequence of the excitement caused by the last disaster, the guards upon all the public buildings were doubled, no precaution was omitted that wisdom could dictate, and then we waited to see where the next blow would fall. In this fashion another fortnight went by, during which an incident of no small importance occurred. Quite by chance an explanation was forthcoming as to how the news

of the series of disasters that had been our portion in South Africa during the last few weeks reached our shores. It was discovered that the cable, the only one then working, had been cleverly tampered with, the wires milked, to use an American expression, and a doctored version sent home for consumption. This was corroborated by the mail reports, and despatches describing the course of events in South Africa. Henceforth the most rigid precautions were taken to guard against a repetition of this practice, and then once more we sat down to wait.

I had seen nothing of the Countess for some time. The fright I had received on the last occasion that I had called upon her, was still sufficiently impressed upon my memory to make me a little chary of allowing her to obtain so much influence over me. As will doubtless be agreed, this was a somewhat contradictory decision on my part, for in arriving at it, I had no excuse to offer, save that I entertained for her a mixture of admiration and, I might almost say, of innate distrust. The admiration was easily accounted for; the distrust was somewhat more difficult to explain. Was she not the bosom friend of many of the greatest people in the land? She was to be met everywhere, and was

as well known a personage in London Society as Royalty itself. Her father, it appeared, had left England for the Continent, and it was doubtful when he would return. Her cousin was still with her, and was to be encountered at every social gathering of importance. Young, handsome, and the reported possessor of considerable wealth, it was small wonder that he found himself in request, when so many young men were absent from England. I have stated that I did not care for the young Count Reiffenburg, and now I will go even further by saying that the more I saw of him the less I liked him.

At this point in my story it is necessary for me to describe a circumstance, which, though at the time it puzzled me considerably, can now be very easily explained. It occurred on a night when the House sat scarcely so late as usual. As a matter of fact it was but little after midnight when I set off to walk home. For a time after the disappearance of the Colonial Secretary, I had declined to be shadowed by a detective, but now, hearkening to the voice of Prudence, I had consented to be shadowed by a detective whenever I took my walk abroad. Since I am fond of walking, particularly at night, I am afraid my

own particular shadow had rather a hard time of it. He never complained, however, but, faithful to his duty, kept me continually in view, obtruding himself upon my notice as little as possible. The feeling engendered by the knowledge that a man is continually behind one, watching all one does, is the reverse of pleasant. However, like everything else in life, one gets used to it, and after a time I took no notice of it. On this particular occasion, the night being so beautiful, the moon was full, I remember, I strolled leisurely home, my thoughts centred on the debate that had taken place that night. There is a solemnity about Trafalgar Square at midnight, particularly when viewed by the light of the moon, that is far from being its principal characteristic by day. As I passed the spot where I had said good-bye to poor Castellan a few weeks before, I could not suppress a shudder.

Leaving Cockspur street behind me, I passed on to Piccadilly, afterwards proceeding by way of Berkeley Square to my abode. By the time I reached my own door I was in the full enjoyment of the night. It seemed a pity to shut oneself up in the house when it was so lovely outside. I therefore waited until my faithful follower came up to me, and then

informed him that I intended going on for a further stroll.

"There is not the least necessity for you to come," I said. "You may go home to bed as soon as you like."

"I think I would prefer to accompany you, sir," the man replied. "I am on duty all night, and if anything were to happen to you, it would be my fault."

"Very well, then," I answered, "come along."

So saying, we resumed our walk, with the difference that on this occasion I kept the man beside me. He proved an interesting companion, having seen life under a variety of aspects, and in so doing had naturally come in contact with many strange characters. What was more, he had the faculty of being able to put them before you in a novel and interesting light. He had been three times to America in search of criminals, once to India, and once to Australia.

By the time I had heard his experiences in the last-named country we had reached Park Lane, and were drawing near Wiltshire House. At the corner we called a halt, while I felt in my pocket for a match for my cigar. We were standing in deep shadow, Wiltshire House being on the

further side of the road, and in the full light of the moon. Having found a match, I was about to strike it, when the figure of a man on the opposite side of the street attracted my attention. The moonlight was so bright that I could see him quite distinctly. He was of the poorest class, evidently a street loafer of the description to be seen any night stretched out on the grass of the Park. My astonishment may be imagined, therefore, when I saw him deliberately ascend the three steps leading to the side door of Wiltshire House. He paused for a moment, then the door was softly opened to him, and he passed inside. Scarcely able to believe the evidence of my eyes, I turned to the man beside me and enquired if he had noticed it? He admitted that he had.

"What does it mean?" I asked. "Is it a case of burglary, do you think?"

"It looks like it, sir," he replied. "Whatever it is, he has got a confederate inside."

"What do you think had better be done?" I enquired. "The Countess de Venetza is a personal friend, and I cannot allow her house to be robbed without making an effort to prevent it."

"We had better call the policeman on the

beat," the man replied; "after that we can arouse the household. There shouldn't be much difficulty in securing the fellow. If you wouldn't mind keeping your eye on that door for a few minutes, sir, I'll go off and find the constable."

I willingly agreed to watch the door, and the detective departed on his errand. In something less than five minutes he returned, bringing two policemen with him. The men had evidently been informed of my identity, for they saluted respectfully, and one of them enquired what I wished done in the matter.

"I think the better plan would be to call up the house-steward and inform him of what we have seen," I replied. "You will then be able to search the house and effect the capture of the burglar."

Leaving us to guard the door through which the old man had entered, one of the policemen went round to the front of the house. The other ascended the steps and rang the bell. To his first summons there was no response, so he rang again. The bell echoed in the basement of the great house, this time to some purpose, for a few minutes later a shuffling footstep was heard within. Then the key turned in the lock and the door was

opened on the chain to the extent of a few inches.

"Who's there?" asked a man's voice.

"Police," answered the officer. "I'm here to warn you that there's a man has just got into the house. Somebody let him in at this door."

"Man got into the house?" was the alarmed response. "You don't mean that, I hope, policeman?"

"I do," replied the constable. "You had better let us come in and have a look round. We've been watching the house and he hasn't come out yet. My mate's round at the front, and there's a detective officer here. Get a candle and we'll go through the rooms with you."

The thought that he was to be called upon to assist in the arrest of a burglar was too much for the old man. He tremblingly invited the officer to lead the way down the stairs to the basement. While they were absent we remained at the door, expecting every minute to hear the sound of a scuffle from within. Five minutes or so later they ascended once more and the constable shook his head.

"Wherever else he is, sir," he said, addressing me, "he's not down there."

The words had scarcely left his lips before the door at the further end of the passage opened, and the Countess herself stood before us. Much to my astonishment I saw that she was in full evening dress. Her appearance was so entirely unexpected that I could only stare at her in surprise.

"What does this mean?" she enquired, with a haughtiness that sat well upon her. "Why, surely it is Sir George Manderville! What can have happened? This is rather a late hour for a call, Sir George!"

I explained what had occurred, told her of the man I had seen enter by the side door, and whom I was perfectly certain had not come forth again.

"Then he must be in the house now," she cried in a voice of alarm. "Who can it be, and who could possibly have let him in?"

"Some dishonest member of your household," I replied. "It would be as well if you were to find out who that person is. In the meantime, let me beg of you to permit the officers to search the house."

To this she willingly assented, at the same time bidding the steward rouse the housekeeper.

"While the search is proceeding won't you

come to my boudoir, Sir George?" she said. "I have been sitting there reading since I returned from the theatre, and I am quite sure that the wretch, whoever he may be, is not in that part of the building."

I followed her to the room in question, which was on the other side of the house, and we were about to enter it, when the sound of a footstep upon the stairs attracted my attention, and I looked up, to see her cousin, Count Reiffenburg, descending towards us.

"What is the matter?" he asked. "Why, Sir George Manderville, I did not expect to find *you* here!"

I briefly explained the situation to him, whereupon he remarked, with that curious smile upon his face:—"It seems that you are destined always to prove our benefactor. But while we are talking here the man may make his escape. I think I will go round with the police, and see if I can be of any assistance to them."

He left us, and for something like ten minutes the Countess and I waited for the sound that was to proclaim the capture of the intruder. But no such good fortune rewarded us. If the man were in the house—and of this I had no doubt—he had managed to

conceal himself so effectually that the police could not find him. In the meantime the housekeeper had put in an appearance, and was despatched to interrogate the female domestics, and discover, if possible, who it was that had opened the door. She returned with the information that she had found all the maid-servants in bed and asleep, while the steward was equally certain that none of the men under his charge had anything to do with the occurrence. At last, after searching the house, the police were compelled to confess that they were at a loss to understand what had become of him.

"But there can be no doubt about his being here," I declared; "I distinctly saw him enter. He was an old man, very ragged, with long grey hair, and stooped as he walked. The detective officer who was with me at the time can also corroborate what I say, if necessary."

"That is not necessary, for of course we accept your word," said Reiffenburg with elaborate politeness. "The question is: if, as you say, he entered, where is he now? He cannot have vanished into space, and we have searched every corner without success."

"Then he must have an accomplice in the house who is hiding him," I returned. "If

both exits have been guarded, he cannot have got out."

By this time I was beginning to wish that I had had nothing to do with the matter. The Countess, however, was profuse in her thanks to me, for what she described as "a most considerate and friendly act."

Seeing that I could be of no further use to her, I apologized for my intrusion and bade them good-night.

"Should we by any chance manage to secure the fellow, I will let you know," said Reiffenburg, as we stood together at the front door. "I fear, however, *we shall not be so fortunate.*"

There was a sneer in his voice, for which I could have kicked him. However, I kept my temper, and murmuring something to the effect that I was glad to have been of service, I took my departure, and the door closed behind me.

"That was one of the most extraordinary affairs I have ever known," I said to the detective, as we turned our faces homewards. "I am quite at a loss to account for it."

The detective stopped suddenly and looked at me.

"The lady and gentleman are particular

friends of yours, sir, I understand, and I don't know in that case whether I ought to tell you what is in my mind. But I fancy I could throw a rather unexpected light upon the affair."

"Speak out, then, by all means," I answered. "What was it you noticed?"

"This, sir," he said, and as he spoke he took from his pocket a small piece of black matter about half the size of a pea. He handed it to me and asked if I had seen it before. I informed him that I was quite sure I had not.

"It only bears out, sir, what I was saying as we came down Park Lane, just before we reached Wiltshire House. If it weren't for little things, that they overlook, we shouldn't be able to lay our hands on half the criminals we want. Now mind you, sir, I don't mean to infer by that that your friend Count Reiffenburg is a criminal. Not at all; that would be a very wrong thing to say. He's probably been playing a practical joke, as gentlemen will. The fact, however, remains that he gave himself away with that little lump of black stuff, just as surely as Bill Coakes of the Minories did when he gave his sweetheart the silk handkerchief

that he picked up in old Mrs Burgiss's bedroom. He didn't think it was of any importance, but she wore it, quarrelled with a girl over it, the police came to hear of it, and Bill was caught. So it was just that slip that brought him to the gallows."

"I do not understand you," I replied, still holding the tiny bit of black stuff in my hand. "What is the connection between this substance and Count Reiffenburg?"

"It's the key to the whole puzzle, sir," he said, and took it from me.

Turning his face away, he put his hand to his mouth, and then wheeling round again, parted his lips and showed me his teeth. The eye-tooth on the right-hand side was missing. He put up his hand once more, and lo! it was restored to its place.

"That's what I mean, sir," he said. "Now I noticed, when the gentleman came downstairs, that one of his eye-teeth were missing. He wanted to make himself look old, I suppose, and when he had taken off the other pieces, had forgotten to remove that one. Then he must have remembered it, for his hand went up to his mouth, and next minute it was on the floor, where I managed to get hold of it."

"Do you mean to infer that the old man we saw enter the house was the Count Reiffenburg?" I asked, aghast.

"That is my belief, sir," said the man; "and I feel certain that if I were allowed to search his bedroom, I should find my suspicions corroborated."

"But what possible reason could he have for masquerading as a pauper outcast, and who let him in?"

"As to his reason, sir, I can hazard no sort of guess," he continued. "But it was the lady herself who let him in."

"How on earth do you know that?"

"By a process of simple reasoning, sir. Did you happen to notice that, when we returned to the hall after our search of the first section of the house, the gentleman carried a book in his hand?"

"Now that you mention the fact I *do* remember it," I answered. "But what has the book to do with it?"

"A great deal," he answered. "You may not be aware of the fact, but there's a small sitting-room near that side door—a tiny place where the housekeeper does her accounts. The book, when we first searched the room, was lying upon the table."

"May not the housekeeper have been reading it before she went to bed?"

"The housekeeper is an Englishwoman, sir, and not very well educated. I should call it remarkable if she knew Italian, and little short of marvellous if she read Dante in the original. Now, sir, when Count Reiffenburg entered the lady's boudoir, he brought that book with him and placed it on one of the tables. He wouldn't have done that if it had been the property of the housekeeper, would he? No, sir! Count Reiffenburg was out, and the young lady, who is his cousin, I think I understood you to say, sir, sat up for him in order to be near the door. That's the way I read the riddle."

"And I must confess that you have a certain amount of probability on your side," I answered. "At the same time, if I were you, I should say nothing about the discovery. It can serve no good purpose to bruit it abroad. Do you think the two policemen noticed anything of the kind?"

The detective gave a scornful little laugh. "I don't think you need have much fear on that score, sir," he answered. "I doubt very much whether the man who went round

with me noticed the book at all. His theory was that the fellow we saw enter was one of the servants who had been out late, and not a burglar at all."

By this time we had reached my own residence, and I bade the man good-night upon the steps. Having let myself in, I went to my study to deposit some papers I had brought with me from the House, then to my bedroom and to bed. The incident at Wiltshire House annoyed me, if only for the reason that I could not understand it. What could the young Count Reiffenburg have been doing—if it were he, as the detective declared—wandering about London in that attire? That in itself was bad enough, but it was made much worse by the knowledge that his beautiful cousin had been conniving at his escapade. One thing was quite certain; if I had entertained a dislike for Reiffenburg before, it was doubled now. At last, tired by my long day and the events that had concluded it, I fell asleep, and did not wake until I opened my eyes to find Williams standing beside my bed, overcome with excitement and horror.

"What is the matter, man?" I cried. "What makes you look like that?"

"There's terrible news, sir," he faltered.

"There's been a lot lately, but this is the worst of all."

"What is the matter, man?" I cried for the second time. "Don't stand there trembling. Tell me what has happened."

"I scarcely know how to tell you, sir," he answered, his voice almost failing him.

"Then give me the paper and let me look for myself," I said, and took it from him. On the page before me, in large type, was an announcement that made me feel sick and giddy :—

"ASSASSINATION OF THE PRIME MINISTER!"

My horror was greater even than Williams's had been. I read the heavy black lines over and over again, as if unable to grasp their meaning. The Prime Minister dead! My old friend and Chief murdered! Could it be possible?

When I had recovered my composure a little, I took up the paper, and tried to read the account there set forth. There had only been time for the insertion of a short paragraph, but its importance was such that it would ring throughout the world. It ran as follows :—

"It is with a sorrow that cannot be expressed in words, that we record the fact that the Right Honour-

able, the Earl of Litford, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, and Prime Minister of England, was assassinated soon after midnight. The Prime Minister was last seen alive by his private secretary, in the study at his residence at Grosvenor Square. He had left the House of Lords early, but, with the exception of a slight headache, appeared to be in the best of health and spirits. The presumption is that he was stabbed in the back, but how the wound was inflicted, and by whom, are matters which, at present, cannot be explained."

I could find no words to express my horror and surprise. It was only a few hours since he had congratulated me upon my speech in answer to the accusations of certain members of the Little Englander Party; now England was bereft, by as foul an act as had ever been committed in the annals of crime, of one of her greatest statesmen and of one of her noblest sons.

Craving further particulars, I dressed with all speed, and then drove to his residence in Grosvenor Square. Leaving my cab, I walked towards the well-known house, before which a large number of people had collected. Recognising me, they allowed me to pass, and so I gained the front door of the house I had so often entered as the friend and colleague of

the dead man. I was shown into the morning-room, where presently I was joined by the secretary, who, as the newspapers had reported, had been the last to see him before the tragedy took place.

"Tell me about it," I said, after we had greeted each other.

From his narrative I gathered that the dead man, on his return from the House, after spending half-an-hour with his wife, went to his study. His secretary followed him there, to ascertain if he could be of any further assistance to him. He found him seated at the table writing, and was informed by him that he required nothing more, and that it would not be very long before he himself retired to rest.

"Was the window in the study open?" I asked.

"No," he answered; "it was closed, and the shutters were barred. That was at half-past eleven. At half-past twelve, wondering why her husband did not come upstairs, Lady Litford went in search of him. Her horror may be pictured when she discovered him, seated in his chair, quite dead. He had been stabbed to the heart from behind."

"And were there no traces of any one having entered the room?"

"Not one. The police have taken possession of it, but so far they have been unable to discover any trace of the assassin's entry or the means by which he effected his departure."

"And Lady Litford? How does she bear up under the blow?"

"So bravely, that it makes one's heart ache to see her."

Then, at my request, he conducted me upstairs, and I was permitted to gaze upon the face of the dead man. It was as peaceful as in life's serenest moments, calm and dignified—the face of a man who has done his duty to his Sovereign and his country, and whose life has been given in her service. Then, with a sorrow in my heart greater than I had known for many years, I looked my last upon the face of the dead, and I left the room.

When I had sent a message of deepest sympathy to the widow, I bade the secretary good-bye, and left the house. So awe-struck was the crowd by the magnitude of the tragedy, that scarcely a sound came from it, though, as if in proof of sympathy, here and there a hand was stretched out to me.

"He was a good man and a proper gentleman," said a burly costermonger. "It's a pity we hadn't more like him."

It seemed to me that that homely speech was as fine an eulogium of the dead as could have been spoken by the most cultured tongue.

I often wonder now what I should have done, had I known the part I had unconsciously played in that terrible drama. At that moment, lying, no one knew where—perhaps in the crevice of some paving-stone, or carried into the water-table by a passing shower—was a small piece of black wax, which, could it have spoken, would have been able to tell a tale without its equal for treachery and villainy in all the world. How I became aware of this, you will learn as my story progresses.

CHAPTER VI

THE catalogue of woes, which it has been my ill-fortune to be compelled to chronicle, is indeed a long one, but of all the items I have set down, none had had such a terrible effect upon the public mind as the assassination of the Prime Minister. Expressions of genuine sorrow poured forth from every side, and party feeling, for the time being at least, was forgotten. Even the most antagonistic of the Continental journals, though perhaps rejoicing in their hearts at Great Britain's misfortune, admitted that she was passing through a time of severe trial, and while they prophesied our ultimate downfall, showed very plainly their admiration for our fortitude. Indeed the self-control of the nation at this particular period was a little short of marvellous. The war was draining her of her best blood; those at the helm of the Ship of State were being one by one mysteriously done away with; she had been the victim of a

vast scheme of false intelligence, her great arsenal had been blown up and the supply of munitions of war thereby seriously imperilled at the most critical juncture; a large proportion of her army were prisoners in the enemy's hands, and three other portions were locked up in beleagured towns. Yet, with it all, she continued the struggle with as much determination as she had first entered upon it. The bull-dog tenacity permeated all classes; it was shared by the peer, the country squire, the small farmer, the tradesman and the artizan; it was voiced by the Prime Minister, and echoed by the costermonger. Whatever it might cost, England was resolved to win in the end. That end, however, was still far off, and much blood would have to be spilt and a large amount of money spent before we should be able to call ourselves the victors.

Meanwhile, troops were still pouring out of England, and more were hastening to her assistance from Australia and Canada. Even in these loyal portions of the Empire, however, strenuous efforts were being made by some mysterious power, upon which it was impossible to lay hands, to undermine their affection for the mother country. Treasonable pamphlets were distributed broadcast; an infernal machine

was discovered on board a troop-ship on the point of sailing from a Queensland port; another was discovered on board a transport in Sydney harbour; while a third vessel, owing to the wilful carelessness of the captain, who was afterwards arraigned on a charge of High Treason, but was acquitted for want of sufficient evidence, was put ashore, with all her troops on board, on the coast of South Australia. It was in Canada, however, that the trouble was worst. Its proximity to the United States favoured the Fenian propaganda, and, despite the loyalty of the French Canadians—of which no one felt a doubt—an attempt was made to induce them to swerve in their allegiance to the Empire. Such was the state of affairs when Lord Litford's successor took up the reins of office.

It must not be thought that, because they achieved no result, the police were lax in their attempts to discover the perpetrator or perpetrators of that cruel crime. To employ again that well-worn phrase, not a stone was left unturned to arrive at an understanding of the manner in which the deed was done. One thing was quite certain, it had been carefully planned; but then so had the disappearance of Woller and the Colonial Secretary. The

destruction of Woolwich Arsenal was a work of devilish ingenuity; while the blowing up of the transport *Sultan of Sedang* at Madeira was arranged to a nicety. In the case of the Prime Minister, the servants and members of his household were interrogated, but were all dismissed from the case as being beyond suspicion. They unitedly declared that, to the best of their belief, no stranger had entered the house up to the time of their going to bed, nor had any suspicious person been seen in its vicinity during the day. Moreover, the police on duty in the Square had been instructed to keep a watchful eye upon the house, and they were able to affirm that they had seen no one loitering near the Prime Minister's residence from the earliest hours of morning until the time that the news of the tragedy was made known. Yet the fact remained that some one *had* entered the house, and had been able to make his way unobserved to the library, where the crime was committed, and afterwards to get out again undiscovered. Needless to say, a large reward was offered by the authorities for any information which would lead to a conviction; but though a multitude of communications were received in answer to it, from all sorts and conditions of people, not one was of any value.

On the Friday following the assassination of the Prime Minister, and the day before the funeral, according to custom I took a constitutional in the Park before going down to my office. As a matter of fact I was somewhat earlier than usual, and for that reason, with the exception of a few riders in the Row, and the customary bicycle contingent, the Park was comparatively empty. I entered by the Grosvenor Gate, walked as far as the Barracks, and then retraced my steps towards Piccadilly, passing along the north bank of the Serpentine. I had several difficult problems to work out that day, and one of them was occupying my mind as I walked beside the lake. Suddenly a voice I recognised fell upon my ear, and I looked up to find, seated a few paces distant from me, no less a person than the Countess de Venetza. She was engaged in an earnest conversation with a dark, foreign-looking individual, an Italian, without the shadow of a doubt. The Countess did not see me at first, but, as soon as she did, she said something hurriedly to the man beside her and came forward to greet me.

"You are out early, Sir George," she began. "The Park is delightful at this time of the day, is it not?"

"Delightful indeed," I replied. "I did not expect, however, to have the pleasure of meeting you in it."

"I walk here almost every morning," she answered. And then, after we had uttered a few commonplaces, she continued: "And now, while I think of it, let me apologize to you for my rudeness in having omitted to thank you again for the great service you rendered us on the occasion of the burglary at Wiltshire House. Had it not been for your prompt action, we should have been more seriously robbed, while it is quite possible that something worse might have happened."

"You say that you might have been '*more seriously robbed*'?" I returned. "Am I to understand, then, that the man was found in the house after all?"

"He was not found *in the house*," she replied. "But we have discovered by what means he effected his escape from it. While Conrad and the police were looking for him downstairs, he was hidden in a dressing-room adjoining that which used to be my father's apartment, at the back of the house. When they ascended the stairs he opened the window and lowered himself down to a roof below. Then he must have made his

way through the mews at the back and reached safety again. In proof of this a small silver ornament, one of the few missing things, was found next day in the guttering of the roof."

If this were so, then the detective's statement to the effect that the man who had entered the house was none other than young Reiffenburg was altogether beyond the mark, and would only serve to show the folly of judging by purely circumstantial evidence.

"In that case, who do you suspect of having admitted him to the house?" I enquired, for this was a point of considerable importance.

"An under-footman," she replied, "who has since been discharged. His behaviour struck Conrad as being rather suspicious at the time, but it was not until other things were found to be missing, that we derived a real knowledge of his character."

"I am rejoiced to know that the mystery has been solved," I said. "But pray forgive me, Countess; see, I have driven your friend away."

She gave a start before she replied.

"He is not my friend," she answered somewhat hurriedly, "merely a begging compatriot. The poor fellow is a teacher of music,

who puts forward his art as a claim upon my bounty. He is anxious to return to Italy, but cannot do so for want of means."

Now there was one point about this speech that I did not understand. As I had approached the seat, I distinctly heard the foreigner say authoritatively in Italian: "It is the order of the Council and must be obeyed." Of course the words might have meant anything, but the tone was certainly one of authority. It struck me as being peculiar that an impoverished music-master, soliciting the Countess's assistance, should address her in such a tone. Why I should have bothered myself with the fellow's affairs I cannot say. The impulse, however, was irresistible.

"To be stranded in a strange country is a hard fate," I said. "Since I am also a devotee of his beautiful art, will you not permit me to assist you in your work of benevolence. If you will furnish me with the man's name and address, I will see that he is helped to attain his object."

As I said this I could not help thinking that I detected a frightened look in her face.

"Oh, no, you must not do that," she said hurriedly. "He is a very proud man, and

would only accept help from me because I am a compatriot and happen to know something of his family. I feel sure that he would be extremely angry with me if he knew that I had said anything to you upon the subject."

"I am sorry that you will not let me assist him," I said. "I have no desire, however, to hurt his feelings. Forget that I said anything about it."

"Ah! now I have offended you," she continued, with a look of pain upon her face. "Forgive me, I am very thoughtless. Had we been speaking my own Italian it would have been different. Your English is so hard, so unsympathetic."

Her voice was so full of entreaty, her whole demeanour so expressive of sorrow, that I almost repented me of the trick I had endeavoured to play upon her. What did it matter to me whether the man were an old friend, or only the stranger she had represented him to be? I accordingly begged her to say no more upon the subject, assuring her that I was not in the least hurt at her declining my offer. This seemed to soothe her, and presently, when we had walked some little distance beside the water, her cheerfulness returned. She had been amusing herself

of late, so she informed me, by working out a sketch for the dinner-party to which she had invited me. It was to be an unique affair of its kind.

"All that remains to be settled is, when shall it be?" she asked. "How would Thursday next suit you?"

"Impossible, I am afraid," I answered. "I have promised to go to Aldershot on Wednesday, to be present next day at an inspection of the men who are to sail on Saturday for the South."

"Then would the Wednesday following suit you?"

"Admirably," I replied. "It would be more convenient for a variety of reasons."

"Then it is settled that we are to dine together on Wednesday week at eight o'clock. You will not forget?"

"Is it likely that I should be guilty of such rudeness?" I asked, and then added, with what was for me unusual gallantry, "I shall count the days that must elapse before the time can arrive."

"I am hopeful of being able to get the Duke of Rotherhithe to meet you," she said. "Do you know that he is in England?"

"I was not aware of it," I answered; "but I am very glad to hear it, nevertheless."

I did not say that one of my reasons for being glad was that I hoped to be able to obtain from him some particulars concerning my fair friend. I remembered the statement she had made during our journey from Paris together, to the effect that she and her father had been yachting with Rotherhithe in the Mediterranean. If they were on such intimate terms it was more than likely that my old friend would know more about her than any one else in our world of fashion would be likely to do.

When we reached Hyde Park Corner we paused for a few moments. I do not think she could ever have looked more beautiful than she did then, certainly never more dangerous.

"I wonder if, after we part, we shall ever meet again?" she said, with what was almost a touch of sadness in her voice.

"Are you, then, thinking of leaving England soon?" I asked in some surprise, for until that moment she had not spoken of terminating her visit.

"I do not think we shall remain very much longer," she replied. "I have duties abroad that are calling for my attention."

"I hope when you go that you will be able

to say you have enjoyed your stay with us?" I said.

"I should have," she replied, "had it not been for this dreadful war. But as things are, how could one enjoy oneself?"

Had I known then all that I now know, I should have realized the double meaning contained in her remark. But more of that anon.

At last we bade each other good-bye, and separated, she crossing the Park in the direction of Wiltshire House, while I passed out and made my way over Constitution Hill towards Pall Mall.

On the Wednesday following the event I have just described, I accompanied the Commander-in-Chief and several other members of the Government to Aldershot, to inspect the large body of troops then about to leave for the front. We were to be the guests of Lord Beckingdale during the time we were there, and were to return to London on the Thursday evening after the inspection. We accordingly left Waterloo together, proceeded by train to Farnborough, and then drove to Lord Beckingdale's residence by coach. It was a glorious afternoon, and the change from London to the country was delightful. I commented upon this, whereupon Beck-

ingdale, who is one of my oldest friends, began to rally me on my preference for the Metropolis.

"I thought you would get over it in time," he said with one of his hearty laughs. "Why don't you marry, George, and settle down in the country? You would make an ideal Squire."

"I should be bored to death in a week," I replied. "Besides, who is there that would take pity on me? I am not so young as I was, and I am afraid that I have had my liberty too long to make a good husband."

As I said this the image of the Countess rose before my mind's eye, though why it should have done so at this particular moment is more than I can say. Though I admired her intensely, my admiration went no further. She was a delightful hostess and an exceedingly clever woman, but I should no more have thought of making her Lady Manderville than I should have tried to jump from the Clock Tower of the Houses of Parliament into the river.

At that moment we were descending a steep hill, through a closely-wooded plantation. We were half-way down, when I happened to catch sight of a man standing among the trees, some

fifty yards or so from the road. Strange to say, he was watching us through a pair of field-glasses, and was evidently much interested in our movements, though it looked as if he himself had no desire to attract attention. Then he disappeared amongst the brushwood, and, for the time being, I thought no more about him.

On reaching the Park, we were most cordially received by Lady Beckingdale, and partook of afternoon tea with her in the hall, which is one of the most charming features of that beautiful house. A stroll round the grounds, and a visit to the stud farm afterwards, wiled away the time until the dressing gong sounded. Then we returned to the house, and made our way to our various rooms. Before commencing to dress I went to the windows and looked out. The gardens on that particular side of the house slope upwards until they reach the small paddock which separates them from the woods behind. Now I have a fairly sharp eye, and a faculty of noticing, which sometimes stands me in good stead. On this particular occasion I was watching the evening light upon the trees in the plantation opposite, when suddenly I saw a brace of

pheasants fly quickly out, followed by half-a-dozen more. They had evidently been disturbed by some human being.

"Just give me my glasses for a moment, Williams," I said, and in a trice he had handed me the pair I had brought down for the inspection next day. Seating myself in the window, I brought them to bear upon the spot where the birds had flown out. For a moment I could see nothing. Then I thought I could detect what looked like a grey trouser-leg, peeping out beneath the branches of a fir. I called Williams to my side and handed him the glasses, directing him where to look.

"What do you make of it?" I asked.

"It looks as if there's somebody hiding there, sir," he answered. "Yes, sir, I'm sure of it," he added a few moments later. "If you will look now, you will be able to see him creeping away."

I took the glasses again and once more turned them upon the spot. What he had said was quite correct; the figure of a man dressed in a grey suit could just be distinguished disappearing into the deeper part of the wood. It immediately occurred to me that the man I had seen that afternoon,

when we were on our way to the Park, had also been dressed in grey. Could this be the individual who had watched us then? And if so, what were his reasons for behaving in this mysterious fashion? I did not like the idea of it, remembering as I did the dangerous condition of the times, and the manner in which so many of my friends had been attacked.

"Keep what you have seen to yourself, Williams," I said; "I will speak to Lord Beckingdale myself about it when I go downstairs. If the man is a poacher, or has any dishonest reason for being there, he will know what to do in the matter."

Williams promised to obey my instructions, and when I had dressed, I made my way downstairs to find our host and the Commander-in-Chief standing before the fire-place, in which a cheerful fire was burning.

"By the way, Beckingdale," I said, when I had answered the remark one of them made to me as I descended the stairs, "who is the man in your plantation with the grey suit and field-glasses."

"Man with grey suit and field-glasses?" he repeated, with a look of surprise on his face. "I have many friends who are the

happy possessors of both articles. But what makes you ask me such a question at the present moment?"

"For a good and sufficient reason," I replied, and went on to tell him of the two occasions that afternoon upon which I had seen the person in question.

"What a singular thing!" he said, when I had finished. "I wonder who the fellow is, and what his idea can be in watching the house? As you are aware, the place is being patrolled by police to-night, and I think I had better inform them of the circumstance. After the terrible events of the last few weeks it does not do to run any risks. Can you describe the man?"

I furnished him with as accurate a description of the fellow as it was possible to give, whereupon he departed in search of the officer in command of the police. When he returned we joined the ladies in the drawing-room, and then went in to dinner. It was not until the ladies had withdrawn and cigarettes were lighted, that the subject of the grey man was introduced. A small piece of paper was handed to our host by the butler. He glanced at it and then looked across the table to where I sat.

"Here is the police report," he said. "It informs me that they have scoured all the plantations round the estate with the assistance of the keepers, but have not been successful in discovering the man you saw. No doubt he was some prying celebrity hunter, who has taken himself off, to Aldershot probably, where he will have no opportunity of seeing you to-morrow."

This brought a round of questions from the others, who, with the exception of the Commander-in-Chief, had not heard of the incident. When each man had settled the question to his own satisfaction, the subject was dropped, and we rose from the table to return to the drawing-room. Here we indulged in music and conversation until half-past ten o'clock, smoked in the billiard-room for another hour, and at half-past eleven bade each other good-night in the gallery that ran round the hall, and retired to our respective rooms. By this time the character of the night had changed. A boisterous wind had risen, and heavy rain was driven tempestuously against the window-panes. It certainly did not look very promising for the inspection on the morrow. I inquired from Williams whether anything further had been

heard concerning the man we had both seen in the plantation opposite the house.

"Not that I know of, sir," he replied; "I did not hear it mentioned. But there's one thing that's been on my mind ever since you spoke to me about it to-night, and I must own that it puzzles me. I don't say it's right, of course; at the same time I've got a feeling that I'm not so very far wrong."

"What is it?" I enquired with interest, for Williams is a staid and circumspect individual, and is not in the habit of committing himself to a rash statement.

"It is just this, sir. When you sent me down to the Commander-in-Chief's residence with that note this morning, there was a man walking on the opposite side of the street who, to the best of my belief, was dressed just as this man was—that is to say, in a grey suit and a soft black hat."

"There is nothing very remarkable in that," I answered, a little disappointed. "You would probably find a dozen men dressed in a similar fashion in a short walk through the West End."

"I beg your pardon, sir, but I thought the coincidence worth mentioning," Williams replied

in rather a crestfallen way. Then he bade me good-night and I retired to rest.

That night I slept like a top, and did not wake until Williams entered my room next morning. He informed me that the rain had passed off, that it was a fine day, and then busied himself with preparations for my toilet. These were barely accomplished, and I was in the act of commencing to shave, when the handle of my door turned, and Beckingdale, almost beside himself with excitement, entered the room.

"Great Heavens! Manderville," he cried in a voice which, had I not seen him, I should scarcely have recognised as his, "a most awful thing has happened. The Commander-in-Chief is missing."

"Missing?" I echoed, as if I scarcely understood the meaning of the word. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that his valet came to my man, Walters, about half an hour ago, and told him that he had knocked repeatedly on the door of his master's bedroom and could get no reply. My man came to me with the story, and when I had tried the door myself with the same result, I gave orders that it should be broken in. You may imagine our feelings when we

discovered the room to be empty. The bed had been slept in, it is true, but there was not a trace of the man we wanted. What was more, the windows were shut. The police are now searching in all directions. What on earth shall we do? The inspection is at eleven o'clock, and it is most unlikely that we shall have the good fortune to find him before then."

Terrible as the situation was, I could not help recalling the fact that I had taken part in just such another interview on the morning of Woller's disappearance, when the Commander-in-Chief had asked my advice as to what should be done to find the missing man before that identical hour.

"Help me if you possibly can," cried Beckingdale, who, like myself, was quite overwhelmed by the magnitude of the misfortune. "Though I know I am not to blame, I cannot help reproaching myself for having permitted this to happen in my house. How can it have been managed, and who can have done it?"

I shook my head.

"The same mysterious power that is responsible for Woller's disappearance and for the Prime Minister's death," I said. "But who is there amongst us who can say what

that power is. Good Heavens!" I cried, as the consequences rose before me, "the Commander-in-Chief gone! I can scarcely credit it. Surely some one must have heard something? What room is beneath his bedroom?"

"The dining-room, unfortunately," Beckingdale replied, "and as ill luck would have it, the room adjoining it on the right is empty, while M'Innister occupies that on the left. The latter says he heard nothing suspicious, but that's easily accounted for, by reason of his deafness and the storm we had. But what on earth can have become of him? I would give anything to have him before me now. How cheerful he was last night, and how sanguine as to the ultimate end of the war! This will prove another bitter blow to the nation."

"And it has had enough already," I replied. "We had better telegraph to the War Office and Scotland Yard at once."

"I have already done that," he said. "I have also sent a special messenger to the commanding officer down here, informing him of the occurrence, and asking him to send out troops to scour the country in the hope of discovering some trace of the missing man.

I do not see what else we can do at the present."

Then a thought struck me. What about the grey man whom Williams declared he had seen on the previous morning near the Commander-in-Chief's residence, whom I had seen watching us through field-glasses, on our way to Beckingdale Park, and whom Williams and I had both seen in the plantation opposite the house when I went up to dress for dinner? I recalled the fact of his presence to Beckingdale.

"I have not forgotten him," he said. "Directly I heard that they could not get into his room, a suspicion of what might be in store for us flashed through my mind, and I said to myself, 'If anything has happened to him, I shall say that Manderville's grey man is mixed up in the business.' As soon as the worst was apparent, I spoke to the police upon the subject, and they have once more made an effort to find him or to hear of him, without success. The grey man is as mysteriously missing as the Commander-in-Chief himself, and as to the part he played in the other's disappearance, it seems to me that we are likely to remain as ignorant as we are of everything else. Now, dress as

quickly as you can, there's a good fellow, and come down to my study. We must hold a council together, and see what's to be done."

I did as he desired, and when I was ready I made my way to his study.

When I reached it I found Beckingdale and the one other guest awaiting my coming. The terrible effect that had been produced by the news of the morning was to be seen on their faces. For upwards of an hour we discussed the question in all its bearings, but eager as we were to do all that lay in our power to render assistance to the missing man, we were obliged to confess that we were unable to do anything. By this time wires were pouring in from all parts, and it is quite certain that the powers of the little village telegraph office had never been so severely taxed before. At ten o'clock it was decided, by unanimous consent, that the inspection should be abandoned in the absence of the Commander-in Chief, and accordingly, at half-past ten, we returned to town. It is needless for me to say that it was a miserable journey. Our spirits were as low as it was possible for the spirits of human beings to be. On reaching Waterloo we drove direct to the Foreign

Office, where a Cabinet Council had been hastily called together. When it was over I drove home. The streets echoed to the cries of the newsboys :—

"DISAPPEARANCE OF THE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF!

DISAPPEARANCE OF THE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF!"

That evening a new sensation was added to the already long list when it was known that the notorious anarchist, Luigi Ferreira, had managed to escape from prison some days before, and was supposed to have crossed the Channel and to be in London. Had I only known then that he was the man I had seen talking so excitedly to the Countess in the Park, a few mornings before, and that at that very moment he was occupying a room at Wiltshire House, as a supposed invalid, how speedily might retribution have descended upon him.

Unfortunately, however, I did not know!

CHAPTER VII

THE state of mind into which England was plunged by the news of the disappearance of the Commander-in-Chief cannot be fittingly described by a pen so weak as mine. It was not that we had lost anything of our former courage, or that we had resigned all hope of coming out victors in the struggle. We were as resolved as ever to carry this war through to the bitter end, yet the news clanged like a death knell upon a thousand hearts. Of my own feelings I will not speak. That expressed by the nation voices my own. I was sad, how sad few can guess, but despite my sorrow I declared that the war must go on—that the end should be reached. And now to turn to a brighter subject.

On the Tuesday before the day I was due to dine at Wiltshire House, I had the good fortune to receive a visit from an old friend. He was none other than the Duke of Rotherhithe, the gentleman who had been obliging

enough to convey the Countess de Venetza and her father from Constantinople to Naples on a certain memorable occasion, and who was known to entertain a great admiration for her. Having had a somewhat busy morning, I did not reach home until after two o'clock. I had scarcely sat down to lunch, before Thompson, my butler, informed me that the Duke of Rotherhithe was anxious to see me.

"My dear fellow, this is friendly of you," I said, as we shook hands a few moments later. "You are just in time for lunch. I have only this minute commenced."

"You couldn't offer me anything better," he replied. "I have eaten nothing all the morning. By Jove! how good it is to see your face again, old man, and what a swell you have become, to be sure, since I saw you last —Cabinet Minister, and I don't know what else besides. You'll be Premier before you've done."

"Not quite so high as that," I answered. "I have my ambitions, I will admit, but I am afraid that the Premiership is scarcely the one that will be likely to be realised."

One thing was quite certain: Rotherhithe was in the most excellent spirits. His honest,

manly face was wreathed in smiles, and had an artist been present he might have used it for the personification of Happiness. Throughout the meal he laughed and joked continually, recalled old days, old escapades, long since forgotten on my side, and vowed that we were both of us growing younger instead of older. That there was something unusual about it all I could plainly see, but what that something was I had not then the least idea. My suspicions, however, were aroused very soon.

"By the way," I said, when we had finished lunch, "let me tell you that I have lately had the pleasure to be of some service to an old friend of yours."

"An old friend of mine?" he said, with what I could not help thinking was pretended surprise. "Who is the friend?"

"The Countess de Venetza," I replied. "The lady whose wealth and beauty have made her such a prominent figure in London Society of late. She told me that she had been yachting with you in the Mediterranean, and spoke quite feelingly of your kindness to herself and her father. Do you mean to tell me that you don't recollect her?"

"Recollect her? of course I do," he said, still

with the same sheepish look upon his face. "Oh yes, I remember her well enough. And so you've been kind to her, have you?"

Here he laughed in a foolish fashion to himself.

"Umph!" I said to myself, "surely he cannot have been idiotic enough to have——"

I stopped myself abruptly. I knew very well that I should hear all the news he had to tell quite soon enough.

At last Thompson and the men left the room, and an expression of great solemnity took possession of my friend's countenance. What was more, he drew his chair a little closer to mine.

"My dear old fellow," he said, laying his hand on my arm, "we have been friends many years. In point of fact I don't know of a man whose good wishes I should so thoroughly appreciate. By Jove, old fellow, I am the happiest being in the world! So happy, in fact, that I'm dashed if I know whether I am standing on my head or my heels!"

"Let me reassure you then," I said dryly. "You are standing on your heels at the present moment."

"Confound your silly jokes," he said angrily. "Any one but a Cabinet Minister would have

seen that I was speaking metaphorically. Now I want to tell you that——"

"If you are going to be confidential," I replied, "let us adjourn to the smoking-room. I shall give you much better attention over a cigar, and you will doubtless prove more eloquent."

We accordingly adjourned to the room in question, where I produced a box of cigars, furnished the Duke with a light, and then, when we had seated ourselves, bade him commence his tale. I have often noticed that when a man who is anxious to be communicative is invited to begin his confidences, he finds that his stream of loquacity has dried up. It was so in Rotherhithe's case. He hummed and hawed, gazed very steadily at the ceiling for some seconds, and finally rose from his chair and began to pace the room.

"You may remember," he began in the tone of a man addressing a public meeting, "that you and several other of my friends have continually endeavoured to impress upon me that it is my bounden duty, not only to myself, but to the name I bear, to marry and settle down. You can't grumble, therefore, if I take you at your word."

"You couldn't do better," I said reflectively,

examining the ash of my cigar as I spoke. "There is only one objection to the scheme so far as I can see."

"Objection?" he cried, firing up as usual. "What sort of objection can there be to such a thing?"

"It is just possible you may marry the wrong girl," I said quietly. "You must admit that *that* would be a very decided one."

"I am not likely to be such an idiot," he returned. "What is more, I am not about to marry a girl."

I was becoming more and more convinced that my suspicions were correct.

"In that case, the objection is removed," I said. "And now let me offer you my heartiest congratulations. I sincerely hope you may be happy."

"But hang it all, you haven't asked me yet who the lady is! You might have done that."

"If I wanted to waste time I might very well have done it," I replied. "There is no need, however, seeing that I already know who she is."

"The deuce you do! Then who is she?"

"The Countess de Venetza," I answered, shaking the ash of my cigar into the tray

beside me. "I had my suspicions at lunch, and you afterwards confirmed them. I presume I am correct?"

"Quite correct," he said in a tone of relief. "And, by Jove, don't you think I am a lucky man? Isn't she simply beautiful?"

I offered no reply to the first question. On the second point, however, I was fortunate enough to be in a position to reassure him. Whatever else she might be, or might not be, the Countess was certainly very beautiful.

"I shall have her painted by Collier," he continued, "or another of those artist fellows. She will be in black velvet, holding the folds of a curtain in her hand, and I'll hang it in the gallery at the old place, with all the other family pictures round her. There'll not be another there to equal her."

In my own heart I wondered what those stately old ladies in frills and brocades would say to the new-comer. I did not mention the fact, however, to Rotherhithe. In his present condition he was ready to take offence at anything, at least where she was concerned.

"And when will the wedding take place?" I enquired. "And where?"

"I can't quite say," he replied; "there's such a lot to be settled first, you see. I want

her to let it be in London, but, so far, she hasn't given me a definite answer."

"And her respected father? What has he to say upon the subject?"

"Oh, he's pleased enough. I had a telegram from him this morning. Between ourselves, I think foreigners overdo it a bit, don't you?"

"They certainly express their feelings somewhat more warmly than we usually do," I said, as if in explanation of my own conduct; "but in this case one feels justified in launching out a little. Might I ask how long you have known the lady?"

I put the question listlessly, seeing that the chance of my learning a little of her past history was a poor one.

"Oh, I have known her a long time," he answered vaguely. "We were together in Cairo and Algiers, and other places. What a fellow you are, to be sure, to ask questions! Does it mean that you think——"

He stopped and glared at me, but I soothed him down.

"My dear fellow," I said, "I think nothing at all, except that the Countess is a most charming lady, and that you will doubtless live a most happy life together. I am sure I hope you may."

He looked at me queerly for a moment, and then brought his hand down with a whack upon my shoulder.

"By Jove! Do you know, I believe you have been in love with her yourself," he said. "Now own up!"

"It is very possible," I answered, feeling that my only safety lay in answering as I did. "I have been in love with her ever since I have known her, and with all due respect to you, I shall remain so after she has become Her Grace the Duchess of Rotherhithe. If you are jealous, you will have to forbid me the house."

He laughed uproariously, his confidence quite restored by my candour. Then, with an assurance that I had better not let him catch me flirting with her, he informed me that it was time for him to be off, as he had promised to call at Wiltshire House that afternoon.

"One last question," I said, as we walked towards the door, "and I mean it seriously. What does cousin Conrad say to the arrangement?"

"I don't know what he says in the least, and what is more I don't care," he replied, an angry look coming into his face. "Between

ourselves, George, I don't like that young fellow. I shall take care, once I am married, that he doesn't enter my doors."

"I think you would be wise," I said, and there the matter dropped.

When he had gone, I sat myself down to consider the situation. It displeased me for more reasons than one. Rotherhithe was my old friend. I was exceedingly fond of him, and I had no desire that his married life should prove a failure. Yet what reason had I for supposing that it would? It is true I had seen a good deal of the Countess lately, but not sufficient to be able to declare that I knew her intimately. She was a beautiful woman, an excellent hostess, the possessor of great wealth, and—though beyond her father I knew nothing of her family—evidently of gentle blood. This much was in her favour, yet there were other things which rankled in my memory, and which, had I aspired to the honour of her hand, I should have wanted explained to me. How was it that no one had ever heard of her before she appeared to dazzle all London? Was Count Reiffenburg really her cousin? Who was that mysterious foreigner who had plainly been threatening her on the morning that I had met her in the

Park? And last, but not least, what was the real story of that old tramp's entrance into Wiltshire House on the night of the supposed burglary?

The most alarming question, and the most difficult of all to decide, was whether it was my duty to say anything to Rotherhithe upon the subject. He was, in the main, an easy-going, happy-go-lucky fellow, not overburdened with brains, but in every other respect a high-minded English gentleman. Yet I knew him well enough to feel sure that in a case like this he would have been the first to resent—and, looked at from his own light, quite rightly too—any aspersion that might be thrown upon the character of the woman he loved. That he *was* in love with her there could be no sort of doubt. One had only to look into his face to see it. But *I* was also fond of him, and if I knew there were anything hidden from him which he ought to know, was it not my duty, as his friend, to risk his anger, and the possible rupture of our friendship, in order to make him acquainted with it?

For the remainder of the day I debated this question seriously with myself, but try how I would I was quite unable to arrive at a satisfactory decision regarding it. This much,

however, I *did* do—common politeness demanded it of me: I sat down and wrote a note of congratulation to the Countess. Though I knew in my heart it was a somewhat traitorous proceeding, yet, when the note had been despatched, I must confess I felt easier in my mind. A twinge of conscience, however, still remained to plague me. If only I had not taken the walk that night, or if only I had been too late to see the old man enter the house, I should have been able to regard the whole affair, if not with pleasure, at least with a measure of equanimity. Now, however, it was otherwise.

Next morning a charming little note arrived from the Countess, thanking me for my good wishes, and referring to herself as one of the most fortunate women in the world. As a letter it was delightful; as an expression of the writer's true feelings, well — I was not quite so satisfied as to its genuineness. Charming though the lady undeniably was, and sympathetic to an eminent degree, I found it extremely difficult to imagine her in love. If by chance she were so, however, Rotherhithe was certainly the last man whom it would have been with. The news of his engagement had caused quite a stir, even at that time of almost

daily sensations, in the fashionable world. In consequence of it, however, those who had hitherto been inclined to hold a little aloof from her, as one whose antecedents were not sufficiently well known to warrant the intimacy, now that the Duke had, so to speak, stood sponsor for her, were prepared to admit her into their inmost circle.

As for Rotherhithe he conducted himself like an amiable lunatic, frequented Wiltshire House to an extent that almost bordered on the indecent, and was making plans for the future with the impetuous recklessness of a fifteen-year-old schoolboy. His beautiful home in the Midlands was to be prepared for occupation, a new yacht was to be built that would be the finest of her kind, while Rotherhithe House, in London, was to be refurnished and decorated throughout. Altogether, as somebody said, the Duke's love-affair would be likely to prove the costliest hobby he had indulged in since his majority. But as I have said before, if he desired to marry the Countess, and was convinced that his happiness lay in that direction, it was no business of mine to contradict him.

From the tone I have adopted in speaking of this matter it may be surmised that I was jealous of Rotherhithe's success. Allow me to assure

you, most emphatically, that such was not the case. I am quite prepared to admit that I admired the Countess, as not only a beautiful, but also an exceedingly clever woman. As I have once or twice remarked, however, I am a confirmed bachelor, and I do not think it would be in the power of the fairest daughter of Eve to induce me to change my state.

It was in this frame of mind that I entered the portals of Wiltshire House on the evening of the Countess's dinner. In some ways my interest had departed from it. I was merely a looker-on at a game which was being extremely well played, and, knowing something of the rules by which it is governed, I was able to appreciate the importance of the various moves, while being in no way dependent upon their skill.

The Countess, looking like the Queen of Beauty, received me in the drawing-room. Rotherhithe had already arrived, and, as was plainly to be seen, was ensconced on the summit of happiness.

"I am glad you should be the first to arrive," she said, as if her *fiancé* counted for nothing, "and, while I have the opportunity, I must thank you once more for your charming

letter, and for the kindly sentiments it expressed."

"It was awfully nice of you, by Jove!" put in the Duke, and then added with boyish *naïveté:* "Manderville always knows how to do and say the right thing. He's a past master of tact."

I happened to be looking at the Countess's face as he said it, and if—as I feel sure I did—I read it correctly, it spoke volumes.

"She does not care about him an atom," I said to myself; and then I added, "if that's so, God help my poor old friend!"

A few moments later, when we were nearly at the end of our stock of commonplaces, the other guests arrived. So far as they were concerned, the dinner was likely to prove a success. Besides the Countess, Rotherhithe, and myself, there was Lady Deeceford, who, besides being one of the prettiest women in England, is also one of the wittiest; Deeceford himself, who had just returned from the Pamirs, and who, while being one of the geographical lions of the day, was also a well-informed man of the world; Montague Wordley, the dramatist, whose wit was a puzzle, even to himself; and pretty Mrs Van Hoden, the American

actress, famous alike for her beauty and her talent. These, with Lady Susan Pedthorpe, whose powers are too well known to need description, completed the list.

The honour of escorting our hostess into dinner was given to me, while Rotherhithe gave his arm to Lady Deeceford; the latter's husband took Lady Susan; Wordley, Mrs Van Hoden. To attempt a description of the meal to which we sat down would be impossible; let it suffice that it was unique in every sense of the word. Looking back over a period of more years than I care to think about, I am unable to recall one entertainment that in any way equalled it. The whole thing was original from end to end. The earth seemed to have been ransacked for our delectation. The wines were of the choicest vintages, and the waiting was all that could be desired. By reason, I suppose, of what followed later, every detail of the entertainment is indelibly impressed upon my memory. I can recall the smallest items connected with it. The Countess's Southern beauty, Rotherhithe's jovial countenance, Mrs Van Hoden's rippling laugh, the perfect modulation of Lady Susan's voice, even the glitter of a splendid sapphire on one of Lady

Deeceford's shapely fingers, are as deeply engraved upon my memory as if it were but yesterday. One thing, I must confess, surprised me, while at the same time it added to my pleasure. That was the absence of our hostess's cousin, Reiffenburg. Unable to account for it, I was later on induced to enquire after him.

"He has gone into the country," she replied. "He has heard of some shooting that would appear to be perfection, and he has gone to prove it. Conrad is rapidly becoming Anglicized."

"Consequently, discovering a fine day, he enquires what he shall kill," I put in.

"That pleasant illusion, I fear, is fast passing away," said Deeceford from across the table. "With the abolition of bull-baiting, badger-drawing, cock-fighting, and similar sports, the old order has changed. Fox-hunting is deteriorating before the steady advance of barbed wire; deer-hunting is declared to be an inhuman sport, while pigeon-shooting is fast becoming a purely mechanical performance, played with an inverted saucer and a spring."

The conversation drifted into another channel, and after that nothing more was said about the

Count Von Reiffenburg's absence. Personally, I could not help feeling sure that the reason the Countess had advanced to account for it was far from being the correct one. As I have said elsewhere, I had long ago arrived at the conclusion that the young man entertained a more than cousinly regard for the lady; his absence from the dinner, therefore, was merely an arrangement to ensure his not meeting his more successful rival. The engagement by this time was known throughout London, so that I was only voicing a popular sentiment, at desert, when I proposed the health and happiness of the affianced pair. The Countess murmured her thanks, while Rotherhithe declared that it was jolly good of us to wish them luck, and, by way of adding to the general cheerfulness, hoped that we should all be as friendly after his marriage as we had been before. Then the ladies left the room.

Half an hour later we joined them in the drawing-room, where I was fortunate enough to be able to induce the Countess to play to us. She complied without hesitation, and, if the truth must be told, her music was to me the greatest pleasure I received that evening. As I listened to her,

I could not help recalling that memorable afternoon when she had played to me before. After she had finished, a famous musician, then in London, and whom she had induced to come to her house, played to us superbly. To me, however, his performance was insipidity itself compared with that to which I had just listened. At a quarter to twelve the various carriages were announced, and the guests departed until only Rotherhithe and I were left.

"Well, Sir George," said the Countess, as she stood before the fire-place, one dainty hand up on the mantel-piece and a pretty foot resting upon the brass bar of the fender, "I hope I have succeeded in demonstrating to you the fact that, even at the close of the Nineteenth Century, it is possible to be original in one of the most prosaic actions of life."

"You have certainly given us a delightful proof," I answered. "When my turn arrives, I fear I shall find it difficult to equal, much less to eclipse, your effort."

"I thought nothing was impossible to a Cabinet Minister," put in Rotherhithe, who had, of course, been informed of our rivalry. "We shall look forward to seeing what you can do."

"I fear you will be disappointed in the result," I replied. "And now I must be going. Good-night, Countess. When I say that you have eclipsed even yourself to-night, I cannot pay you a greater compliment."

"Praise from Sir George Manderville is praise indeed," she quoted demurely. Then she added with gracious kindness—"Good-night."

I held out my hand to Rotherhithe, but he did not take it.

"Look here, George," he said, "if you are willing to walk home, I'll tell you what I'll do—I'll come with you. Broughams are not much in my line. If we walk we can smoke a cigar together."

I would far rather have gone home by myself, but it was impossible to put Rotherhithe off. I accordingly consented, though I knew very well what the result would be. Being anxious to leave them alone for a moment, I strolled into the hall, where Rotherhithe presently joined me. We donned our hats and coats and set off, my shadow picking me up at the foot of the steps according to custom.

"Well, old fellow," said Rotherhithe, slipping his arm through mine after we had turned

the corner, "what do you think of her? Isn't she simply perfect? Don't you think I'm the luckiest fellow on earth?"

"Three questions in one breath," I said; "how on earth do you expect me to answer them? Of course you're a lucky fellow, and of course we all envy you your happiness." Then, with an air of seriousness, I continued, "I suppose, Rotherhithe, you are quite convinced that she is the one woman in the world for you?"

"Convinced?" he replied, with a short laugh at the absurdity of the question, "of course, I am convinced. Why, my dear old chap, if I were to hunt the whole world over, I shouldn't find her equal. You've no idea how good she is. What's more, do you know, she's the soul of caution. She's got what I lack—the business instinct."

"Indeed!" I said, for this side of the Countess's character had never been revealed to me. "So she is business-like, is she?"

"I should think she is. Why, when I spoke to her of what I thought of doing at Rotherhithe House, that is to say, of pulling a lot of it down, you know, and rebuilding it, to say nothing of redecorating and refurnishing it throughout, she wouldn't

hear of it. 'Wait,' she said, 'and let us see how we like it. It will be quite time enough when we have been married a few years to think of making changes in what has served so long.'"

"A very sensible remark too," I replied. "I am glad she is not going to lead you into useless expenditure. It's no business of mine, I know, but that collet of diamonds must have cost a fortune?"

"Thirty thousand pounds," he answered. "But it's worth every penny of it to see it round her neck. She is passionately fond of diamonds. They are the only stones she cares for."

Decidedly I began to think the Countess was a business woman. Had I aspired to the honour of her hand, she would perforce have had to be content with a single string of pearls. Collets of diamonds, costing thirty thousand pounds, are the peculiar gifts of millionaires. Now Rotherhithe, I knew, while a rich man, was far from being overburdened with money. I wished that he had not done it, though why I should have done so, it would have puzzled me to say.

When we reached my house, I invited him to accompany me inside; he would not hear of it, however.

"No," he said, "I'll be getting home now; late hours don't agree with me. But before we part, old friend, there's one thing I want to say to you. I'm going to make a rather big settlement on my wife that is to be, and I want to know if you have any objection to my putting you down as one of the trustees? If you could manage it, I should be more than grateful to you. Should anything happen to me, there is nobody else I know who would look after her interests so well."

I scarcely knew what answer to make. The proposal was one that did not commend itself to me for several reasons. But what objection could I raise to it? I was his friend, and presumably hers also. It would be only natural that he should ask me, and, in the ordinary course of things, it would be only natural that I should accept. For some vague reason, however, events seemed to be moving outside the ordinary course of things, so I determined not to give him an answer then.

"Don't disappoint me, there's a good fellow," he went on. "You can have no idea what importance I attach to your acceptance of the position."

"Let me have until to-morrow morning to

decide," I replied. "It is not my habit, as you are aware, to do anything in a hurry, and I should like to think it over before giving my consent. There are many things to be considered. You may be sure, however, that if I can possibly convince myself that I shall be really serving your interest and hers by acceding to your request, that I shall do so. If I did not think so, I should ask you to find some one else at once, and trust to our old friendship to make you believe that I am right."

"Very good, then, we will leave it like that, and you shall give me an answer to-morrow. And now good-night, George. You may not think so, but this has been the happiest evening of my life." Here we shook hands.

"Let us hope," I said, "that this is only the beginning of your happiness. You will possess a wife of whom you are sure to be proud; you have rank, wealth, and innumerable friends. What more could any man desire? Good-night!"

He waved his hand to me in farewell, and then set off down the street. When he had disappeared, I beckoned my shadow to me, and bade him good-night also. Then I, in my turn, retired from the world.

Not feeling in the humour for bed, I went

to my study and, contrary to my usual habit, lit another cigar. I had a variety of papers to look through, so I seated myself in a comfortable chair and set to work to peruse them. It was a useless endeavour, however, for try how I would to rivet my attention upon them, I found my thoughts reverting continually to the entertainment I had been present at that evening. For more than an hour I remained in my study, then, feeling that I should be better in bed, I went upstairs. I had scarcely reached my dressing-room, however, before the sound of a bell reached my ears. A few minutes later there was a tap upon the door, and Williams entered with a note. I took it from him, and looked first at the address and then at the back. Greatly to my surprise I found that it was from Rotherhithe, to whom I had said good-bye on the pavement outside the house an hour or so before. The contents ran as follows :—

DEAR GEORGE,—Something terrible has happened. For the sake of our old friendship I implore you to come to me at once. I am sending my carriage to fetch you. For Heaven's sake don't delay a moment longer than you can help. Ever your friend,

ROTHERHITHE.

What on earth could be the matter? I asked

myself. Had the Countess changed her mind or had Rotherhithe met with an accident? Not knowing what might be asked of me, I changed my dress clothes for a morning suit as quickly as possible, informed Williams of the fact that I was going to Rotherhithe House, and then descended the stairs.

A brougham with servants in the well-known Rotherhithe livery, was drawn up beside the pavement, and in it I took my place. The door was then closed and we set off.

CHAPTER VIII

AS the brougham sped on its way through the almost deserted streets, I sat and wondered as to what it could have been that had induced Rotherhithe to send such an urgent message to me. That something serious had happened I had not the least doubt, for the Duke was a self-reliant man, and at no time given to the display of emotion. Taking the letter from my pocket again, I endeavoured to read it by the light of the lamps we passed, but it was impossible. The fear that underlay everything was that Count Conrad had returned to town, had met Rotherhithe, and that there had been trouble between them.

After we had been driving for something like five minutes, a most curious thing happened. I was trying to make out an object in the street through which we were passing, when suddenly I found myself in total dark-

ness. Putting my hand up to the right-hand window to see what had occasioned it, I found that a sheet of iron had interposed itself between me and the glass. The same thing had happened in front and on the opposite side, though how it had been arranged, I could not for the life of me discover. Then I tried the doors, but the handles refused to turn. I felt that I was trapped indeed, and to make matters worse, a villainous smell of gas was fast taking possession of the carriage. I shouted for assistance with all the strength of my lungs, but no help came. I tried to force the panels of the carriage, but it was a useless endeavour. Still the sickening smell of gas increased, until I felt that, unless I could get into the fresh air without delay, I should be suffocated—as a matter of fact my senses were already leaving me. Was this how Woller and Castellan had died? I asked myself, for in my own heart I felt that my last hour had come. Scarcely conscious of what I was doing, I believe I stood up and struggled with the door, but with as little success as before. Then I fell back upon the cushions and became oblivious to everything.

How long I remained in this condition I cannot say ; I only know that my next waking thought was the realisation of a spasm of acute pain. It was as if every muscle of my body were being drawn by red-hot pincers. My brain whirred as though to the rattle of a thousand pieces of machinery, while an indescribable nausea held me in its grip. I could not have lifted my head, or have opened my eyes, had my life depended upon my doing so. For what seemed an interminable time, I lay like this, totally unconscious of my surroundings, and, indeed, of everything else save my agony. After a time, however, my senses began to return to me, and I was able to reduce my thoughts to something like order.

At first I had no recollection of what had transpired since I had left home, but little by little it all came back to me. I recalled the letter I had received from Rotherhithe, and the haste with which I had complied with the summons it contained. I remembered the drive through the lamp-lit streets, the sudden darkness that had descended upon me, the overpowering smell of gas, and the sensation, which I could compare to nothing, save that

of approaching death, which I had experienced when I fell back upon the street.

At last I opened my eyes and looked about me. Had I found myself in a vault, I doubt whether I should have been more surprised. As it was, my astonishment was the greater at finding myself in a comfortable bed-room, not very large, it is true, but cheerful to an eminent degree. The furniture was useful, but not luxurious; it consisted of a wash-hand stand, a chest of drawers, a toilet table, two chairs, and the bed upon which I was lying. There were also two pictures, I remember; one, of German origin, in colours, represented the sale of Joseph to the Ishmaelites, and the other, a print of Exeter Cathedral, in which the façade of that fine building was entirely out of the drawing. There was a fire-place, but no fender; a sky-light, but no other window. A strip of Dutch matting covered the floor on the left-hand side of the bed, and when I have recorded that fact, I think I have given you a description of everything in the room.

As for myself, when I had taken these things in, I closed my eyes and tried to rest.

The clang and whir still echoed in my brain, and when I endeavoured to lift my head I discovered that I was as weak as a baby. Though I tried hard to arrive at an understanding of the situation, the attempt was far from being a successful one.

That I was the victim of that same mysterious power which had abducted Woller, Castellan and the Commander-in-Chief, I had not the least doubt; but if they had taken me off, where was I now, and what were they going to do with me? Was I to be retained as a perpetual prisoner, or were they only keeping me until a good opportunity presented itself for doing away with me? Either theory, as I think you will agree, was of a nature calculated to render me sufficiently uncomfortable.

After a time I must have fallen asleep again, for I remember opening my eyes and feeling much stronger than when I first woke. What was more, I was also conscious of a decided sensation of hunger. From the waning light in my room, I gathered that the day was far advanced, and I groaned aloud as I thought of the trouble my absence must be causing my friends. It seemed to me I

could hear the cries of the newsboys in the streets as they shouted :—

"DISAPPEARANCE OF ANOTHER CABINET MINISTER!"

"SIR GEORGE MANDERVILLE MISSING!"

I could picture the anxiety of my own household, and Rotherhithe's anger when he discovered, as discover he certainly would, the use that had been made of his name. Then an overwhelming desire to find out something concerning my whereabouts took possession of me, and I rose from the bed upon which I had hitherto been lying. As I did so a handful of money fell from my pocket. Instinctively, I felt for my watch; it was still in its accustomed place. It was certain, therefore, that robbery had no part in the business.

With tottering steps I approached the door, only to find, as I expected, that it was locked. I looked at the skylight above my head and reflected that by placing a chair on the chest of drawers it might be possible to reach it; in my present weak state, however, such a

feat was out of the question. Even this brief inspection of my surroundings taxed my strength severely, and I accordingly once more laid myself down to rest.

I had one source of comfort, however. Captive though I was, I should at least be able to solve a problem which the great world had given up as hopeless. In other words I should be able to fathom the mystery that surrounded the disappearance of General Woller, of the Colonial Secretary, and also of the Commander-in-Chief. I should know something of the members of that power which had for so long a time past been exercising its malignant influence upon England. The unfortunate part of it was that when I had obtained the knowledge it would be of no use to me.

All this time the feeling of hunger, to which I have already alluded, was gradually growing stronger; imprisonment was bad enough in its way, but imprisonment combined with starvation was intolerable. Unable at last to bear it any longer, I rose from my bed, and beat upon the door with my fists in the hope of attracting attention. Loud, however,

as was the noise I made, it elicited no response. The house might have been deserted for all the answer I received. I beat upon the panels again and again, continuing my efforts until I was exhausted. Still no attention rewarded me. At last, tired out by my efforts, I returned to my bed and sat down upon it. I had scarcely done so, before the sound of footsteps in the corridor on the other side of the door reached my ears. A key was placed in the lock and turned, the door opened, and a man entered the room.

It would be difficult for me to express the surprise I felt at seeing him. You will be in a position to realize something of my feelings, when I say that the man before me was no less a person than the impoverished music-master I had seen appealing to the Countess de Venetza in the Park, and whom I had offered to help. That I was not deceived I was quite certain. I should have known him anywhere by reason of his extraordinary dark eyes and hair.

"Good afternoon, monsieur," he said in French, with an assurance that showed me he was aware of my familiarity with that language.

"What may I have the pleasure of doing for you?"

His calm insolence surprised me. I had expected rough treatment, possibly abuse; to be a prisoner and yet to be treated with such elaborate politeness was not at all what I had pictured for my portion.

"I desire to be set at liberty at once," I replied, with as much firmness as I could muster up. "If you have had a hand in this business, which it seems only right to suppose, let me inform you that it is likely to prove an expensive amusement for you. What treatment you may afterwards receive at my hands will be estimated by the expedition you show in releasing me."

"I sincerely trust, monsieur, that no violence has been used towards you," he said. "The instructions were merely to bring you here with as little inconvenience to yourself as possible. You may rest assured that if those instructions have not been complied with, the offenders will be punished. In the meantime, perhaps it is possible that I can be of some service to you?"

"You can provide me with food," I answered

angrily; "and, since my watch has stopped, perhaps you will be good enough to tell me the time."

"I will do so with pleasure," he said. "If Monsieur will permit me, I will arrange that dinner shall be served at once; at the same time I will inform him as to the state of the clock."

Having said this he bowed and left me.

Ten minutes or so later I again caught the sound of footsteps in the corridor, the key was turned in the lock, and the door opened. This time he carried in his hand a tray, upon which were set out the various necessaries for a meal. He laid the table in silence, and then again withdrew. When next he returned he brought with him a number of covered dishes, and, what was more, an ice-bucket, in which stood a bottle of champagne.

"I trust Monsieur will find everything to his satisfaction," he said, as he removed the covers. "If the cooking is not exactly what Monsieur has a right to expect, perhaps he will remember the inconveniences under which we are labouring. Should he need anything further, there is a bell, which Monsieur has not noticed,

beside the fire-place, and the summons will be instantly obeyed."

"But, my good fellow," I cried, "this sort of thing is all very well in its way, you know, but——"

"If Monsieur will take my advice, he will dine before his food gets cold," the man replied. "The kitchen is in the basement; the viands have, therefore, been already some time upon the road."

I saw that it was useless to argue, or to attempt to extract any information from him. I accordingly allowed him to bow himself out without further words. When he had gone, and the door had been locked behind him, I approached the table and lifted the covers. On the first dish was a pheasant roasted to a nicety; the potato chips were exquisitely crisp, the bread-crumbs just what they should be.

"It is very evident that they do not intend to starve me," I said to myself as I drew up my chair. "If ever I get out of this mess, what a tale I shall have to tell! Last night the guest of the Countess de Venetza at Wiltshire House: to-night the guest of——well, of whom? Can it be possible that this is the head-quarters of a

secret society, and that my unfortunate friends are concealed in it?"

This should have afforded me food for reflection, but, strangely enough, it did not interfere with my enjoyment of the meal. I could not remember ever to have tasted so delicious a bird. Never before had I drunk champagne with such a keen appreciation of its delicacy. When at last I put down my knife and fork I was a different man, and was able to look my affairs in the face with a greater amount of equanimity than I had yet felt.

By this time night was drawing in and very soon it would be dark. I accordingly rang my bell in order that the table might be cleared. The summons was answered with a sufficient promptness to suggest the idea that the man who had brought the meal to me had been waiting outside.

"I trust his dinner has been to Monsieur's satisfaction," he said, as he placed the various articles upon the tray.

"Upon that score I have no fault to find," I replied. "And now perhaps you will be kind enough to let me have a little talk with you?"

"It will give me the greatest pleasure to talk with Monsieur, provided he does not touch upon forbidden subjects," he answered. "Should he do that, my lips will be immediately sealed."

"I have yet to find out what those forbidden subjects are," I said, affecting a coolness I was far from feeling. "I presume you mean with regard to my detention here?"

"Exactly," he replied. "It is with regard to the reason for the detention of Monsieur that I am unable to speak with him."

"I know how I got here," I returned. "What I want to know is, who brought me, and what is to be done with me?"

He only shook his head.

"My lips are sealed. I must beg that Monsieur will put no further questions to me upon this matter."

Seeing that it was useless to do so, I complied with his request, contenting myself by asking him if it would be possible to procure me a lamp and a book. He replied to the effect that it would give him the greatest pleasure, and once more left the room, as usual taking care to lock the door behind him.

Presently he returned, carrying a lamp in one hand, and in the other half a dozen books, which he placed upon the table.

"I fear our stock of literature is not extensive," he said. "Doubtless, however, Monsieur will find something here to interest him. Should he require anything further, perhaps he will ring the bell. Our desire, as I said before, is to do all that we can to ensure Monsieur's comfort."

"But not his happiness," I replied; "otherwise he would scarcely be here."

"Once more I must remind Monsieur that we are treading upon dangerous ground," he said.

Without another word he bade me good-night, and left me to derive what amusement and instruction I could from the collection of books he had placed upon the table.

They were, in truth, a motley assortment, comprising two volumes of sermons by a Divine who had flourished at the commencement of the century, a book of poems by a lady of whom I had never heard, "Cæsar's Commentaries" in the original, and the second volume of "Pride and Prejudice," with the label of a seaside

circulating library upon the cover. I chose the last-named for preference, and not having read it before, and knowing nothing of what had taken place in the previous chapters, endeavoured to interest myself in it. The result, however, scarcely justified the labour. Heaven forbid that I should belittle a work that has given pleasure to so many thousands, but that night I was not only unable to derive any satisfaction from it, but found that it produced a feeling that might almost be described as one of prolonged bewilderment. After a time I exchanged it for one of the volumes of sermons, only to be equally bemused. The worthy divine's style was, if I may so express it, of the bigoted, yet argumentative, order. Never before had my own spiritual outlook appeared so ominous. I could plainly see that I had nothing to hope for in my present or future state. Almost in fear I closed the book and placed it with its fellows. Then I rose from my seat, and crossed to the door and examined it. It was as securely fastened as before.

Not a sound reached me from the other portions of the house; so quiet indeed was it,

that had I not had evidence to the contrary, I could have believed myself its sole occupant. Having convinced myself that I was not likely to be disturbed, and making as little noise as possible, I placed one of the chairs upon the chest of drawers. By standing upon the latter I found that I was just able to reach the sky-light. I tried to open it, but a few attempts were sufficient to show me that it had been made secure from the outside, doubtless in preparation for my coming. So far, therefore, as that exit was concerned, my escape was hopeless. Bitterly disappointed, I descended from my perch, and pushed the table back to its original position in the corner. It looked as if I were destined to remain a prisoner. In a very dejected state of mind I threw myself upon the bed, and it is not to be wondered at if my dreams that night were of a disturbed and depressing condition.

Punctual to the stroke of eight o'clock my gaoler entered the room, bringing with him the various articles necessary for my toilet.

"In case Monsieur would like to see what the world thinks of his disappearance," said the man, with his usual politeness, "I have brought

copies of several of the morning papers. Monsieur will see that it has caused quite a sensation in England."

He said this with such respect and civility that had a stranger who was not aware of the real state of the case been present, he would have found it difficult to believe that the man was in any way concerned in the affair.

I am inclined to think that an experience such as mine has never befallen another man. Here I was in captivity—if not in the heart of London, at any rate in one of her Suburbs—sitting down to peruse, in cold blood, a newspaper account of my own abduction. The first I picked up recorded the fact that I had been present at a dinner at Wiltshire House, on the previous evening, and that I had returned to my own abode afterwards. My servant, Williams, had given evidence as to the receipt of a note by me, which purported to have been written by the Duke of Rotherhithe. In it the latter asked me to come to him at once. "His Grace sent one of his carriages," Williams remarked in conclusion, "and when my master got into it, that was the last I saw of him." Then came Rotherhithe's

vehement declaration that the letter was a forgery, and his most positive assertion, corroborated by his head coachman, that not one of his horses or carriages had left the stables after his return from Wiltshire House. "The fact therefore remains," said the writer, at the termination of his article, "that the disappearance of Sir George Manderville must be relegated to that catalogue of inexplicable crimes, to which so many of our foremost men have fallen victims of late."

The reports in the other papers were, for the most part, couched in similar language.

As soon as I was dressed, my breakfast was brought to me, but while I had no fault to find with the cooking, I scarcely touched it. I was turning over in my mind a scheme for making my escape, which had suddenly occurred to me, and which, I could not help thinking, possessed a considerable chance of being successful. What was to prevent my springing upon my gaoler when he next entered the room, overpowering him, and then rushing out? Even if I did not succeed in getting away from the house, I might at least be able to attract the attention of people

in the street, and thus be able to induce them to communicate with the Authorities. The idea seemed feasible enough, but I had not only to remember that my keeper was a muscular fellow, but that he would be fighting for what he knew to be a desperate cause. So far as strength went, however, I felt convinced I was his equal. Besides, I should have the advantage of taking him off his guard, which would be many points in my favour. At any rate I was prepared to try. This settled, the next thing to be decided was when would be the best time to put the plan into execution. Should I make the attempt when he returned to take away my breakfast things, or at mid-day when he brought my lunch? To do so at night would, I knew, be useless, since there would not be so many passers-by, and if the windows were dark—and I had every reason to suppose they would be—I should stand but little chance of being seen, and the *raison d'être* of the whole affair would be gone. At last, on the principle that there is no time like the present, I determined to strike while the iron was hot, and to tackle him when he next entered the room. I made my plans accordingly.

In order to reach the table at the further end of the room, it would be necessary for him to go round at the foot of the bed. It was while he was there that the attempt must be made. Having got him down, I would endeavour to take the key from him and reach the door before he could sound the alarm or get upon his feet again. After that I must act as circumstances dictated. On this occasion he was somewhat more dilatory than usual. At last, however, I heard his footsteps in the corridor outside, then the key was inserted in the lock, and a moment later he had entered the room.

Having closed the door behind him, he passed round the bed on his way to the table. My heart by this time was beating so furiously that it seemed impossible that he could fail to hear it. I had been careful to observe in which pocket he placed his key, for I knew that upon my finding that all my hopes depended. An hour seemed to have elapsed before he was bending over the table, engaged in collecting the various articles upon it. On this particular occasion he was in a somewhat more taciturn mood than usual, a fact for

which I was not altogether sorry, for had he addressed me, my nervousness must surely have aroused his suspicions.

At last the moment for action arrived, and I rose from my seat upon the bed. I had scarcely taken a step forward, however, before he turned, and, divining my intentions, prepared to receive me. This was more than I had bargained for, but I had gone too far to turn back. He muttered something in Italian which I did not catch, then I was upon him, had caught him by the throat, and the struggle had commenced.

As a youngster I had won some little notoriety among my companions as a wrestler. The tricks I had learnt then stood me in good stead now. The man, as I have said, was muscular and heavy, but I soon found that I was quite his match. We rocked to and fro, turned over a chair, and on several occasions came perilously near the table. So tight was my grip upon his throat that, though he made two or three attempts, it was impossible for him to give the alarm. How it was that the noise we made did not attract the attention of the other inmates of the house,

I am at a loss to understand. Little by little I began to get the upper hand of him. Then putting forth all my strength, and bringing into play a certain trick that had been an especial favourite in younger days, I threw him heavily backwards. The ruse was a complete success, and so violent was the fall, and with such force did his head strike the floor, that he lay insensible.

As soon as I had recovered my own equilibrium, I knelt beside him and searched his pocket for the key. Having obtained it, I went to the door, unlocked it, and got into the passage outside. One glance was sufficient to show me that the house was of the typical suburban pattern : reception-rooms on the ground floor, bed-rooms on the next, and servants' quarters under the roof. My room was at the top of the house, and probably had once been a housemaid's apartment.

Once in the corridor I paused, to lock the door, thus making my captor doubly secure, after which I made my way towards a door at the further end of the passage, to find it locked. I tried another with the same result, after which only one remained. Turning the

handle of this I entered, to discover that the window of the room looked over the back, upon a long strip of garden, at the end of which were some high trees—limes if I remember correctly. Escape from the house by this room was plainly impossible. There was nothing for it, therefore, but for me to descend the stairs and try my fortune elsewhere. If the rest of my gaolers were not aware that the man who waited upon me was prisoner in my room, it was within the bounds of possibility, I argued, that they might mistake my step for his.

Accordingly, I wasted no time, but descended the stairs, keeping a sharp look-out over the banisters as I did so. I had reached the next floor in safety and was preparing to descend to that below, when the sound of a door being closed in the basement caused me to hesitate. It was followed by a man's laugh, and a moment later, some one, who I could not see, began to ascend the stairs. In another second he would have turned the corner and have seen me. I can assure you it was one of the most anxious moments of my life. To go on was impossible; to go back more dangerous still. I had only

two seconds' grace in which to act, but which door should I choose? Having selected that immediately opposite me, I softly turned the handle and entered the room—to make a discovery which for a moment deprived me not only of the power of locomotion, but even of thought. My readers will appreciate this when I say that, standing beside the fireplace, with one elbow resting on the mantel-piece, and a cigarette between his lips, *was no less a person than Conrad Reiffenburg;* while seated in a comfortable chair, her dainty feet resting on the brass fender before her, was his cousin, *the Countess de Venetza!*

"So you have managed to escape from your room, have you?" said Conrad with the utmost coolness, and without any apparent surprise. "I wonder how you did that?"

"You here?" I said, addressing the Countess, and disregarding him altogether. "What on earth does this mean? Have I gone mad?"

She was quite equal to the emergency. There was not a tremor in her voice when she replied.

"Not at all mad, my dear Sir George. It simply means that you have to thank me for

saving you from a terrible death. Quite by chance I became aware that there was an anarchist plot in preparation against yourself and certain other members of your Government. To have revealed my knowledge to the Authorities would have been to implicate several of my dear, but misguided, friends, while to have appealed to them for mercy would have been as useless as it would have been dangerous. I therefore took what I deemed the next best course, and removed you out of the reach of harm."

"Can this be true?" I asked, for the whole thing seemed too wildly improbable.

"You surely would not doubt the Countess's word," Conrad put in.

I paid no attention to him, however.

"But if there was a plot against me, why did you not warn me?" I continued. "I could then have taken steps to insure my own safety."

"Impossible," she replied. "You would have communicated with the Police at once. No, the only thing was to act as we did, and I think, since you are still alive, that you have every reason to be thankful that we adopted such prompt measures."

I remembered the precautions that had been taken to prevent my leaving the brougham, and the peculiar smell of gas which had caused me to lose consciousness. No; I felt convinced in my own mind that the story the Countess had told me was pure fiction—that is to say, so far as any desire went to save me from harm. However, I was wise enough to control myself, and to appear to credit her assertion.

"And now that the danger is over, when shall I be at liberty to go into the world again?" I asked.

"To-night your freedom shall be restored to you," she answered. "I have every reason to suppose that you will be quite safe now."

This was agreeable news indeed, if only I might credit it. But by this time my suspicions were so thoroughly aroused, that I did not feel inclined to trust anybody.

What was I to do? I had no desire to return to my prison, yet if I ran to the window, there was still a long strip of garden between the house and the street, and it was likely that my cries, even supposing I were permitted to get so far, would not be heard by the

passers-by. I had already noticed that Conrad's hand was in his coat-pocket, and my imagination told me what that pocket contained. Then the sound of some one descending the stairs reached my ears, and next moment my gaolor burst furiously into the room. His relief at seeing me was evident, but he seemed unable to understand how it was that he found us conversing so quietly together. He looked from one to the other of us as if for an explanation.

"I have put the situation before Sir George," said the Countess, "and I have also told him that the danger is over now, and that to-night he will be at liberty to go where he pleases."

"And for the present what is to become of me?" I enquired, before the man could say anything.

"We shall be delighted if you will give us the pleasure of your company," said the Countess. "Forgive me for not having asked you to sit down before."

Having by this time made up my mind as to how I should play my part, I did as she suggested, and for the rest of the morning

remained in the room, conversing with her on a hundred different subjects, and acting for all the world as if our meeting had been of the most casual description. At one o'clock luncheon was served, and we sat down to it, still on as friendly terms as ever. As I had noticed with regard to the previous meals of which I had partaken in the house, the cooking was perfect, the wines excellent, and the waiting all that could be desired.

On one point, by this time, my mind was quite made up. As soon as I escaped from captivity, I would open Rotherhithe's eyes as to the true character of his *fiancée*. One thing, I must confess, puzzled me considerably. I could not understand why, if they had been at such pains to secure me, they should be willing to liberate me so soon. I was destined to be better informed on this point, however, before very long.

During the progress of the meal the Countess chatted with me as pleasantly as if we were sitting in her dining-room at Wiltshire House. It was significant, however, that Rotherhithe's name was never once mentioned. When the meal was at an end

she gave us permission to smoke, and accordingly, after our coffee had been handed to us, Conrad proffered me his cigarette case. How was I to know that the coffee had been drugged, and that within a quarter of an hour of my drinking it, I should be lying fast asleep in my chair, beyond all knowledge of my surroundings. The Countess had scored another trick.

CHAPTER IX

OF all that occurred after I became unconscious I am quite ignorant. From the moment of my closing my eyes until six o'clock next morning my mind is a perfect blank. All I remember is, that little by little I became aware of a strange oscillation. It was as if my bed were being tossed violently about, to the accompaniment of a noise like the groaning of a thousand tormented souls.

"It will go off if I lie still," I said to myself. But instead, every moment, it grew worse. At last, when I could bear it no longer, I opened my eyes and looked about me. What I saw was calculated to afford me considerable astonishment. I had imagined myself to be lying in the room whence I had escaped, what I supposed to be a few hours before. I was not there, however. The place in which I was lying was the cabin of a ship, and was some

nine feet long by six in width. Opposite the bunk in which I lay, was the customary brass-bound port-hole, with a cushioned settee, or locker, below it. The door was at the foot of the bed; a wash-hand stand with a mirror above it stood against the bulkhead, there was a narrow strip of faded carpet upon the floor, and when I have noted these things I have furnished you with a detailed description of the cabin. What the name of the vessel was and how I had got there were questions I could not answer. One thing, however, was quite certain; whatever else she might be, the ship was not a good sea boat. She rolled abominably, and from the pounding noise on deck I gathered that she was taking aboard more seas than was altogether comfortable. With my head clanging like a ship's bell, I managed to scramble out of my bunk and approach the port-hole. Constantly blurred though the glass was by the waves that dashed against it, I was able to convince myself that there was no land in sight. All I had before me was a confused, tumbling mass of water, an expanse of cloud-covered sky, and once, when we rose upon a particularly heavy sea, the fleeting picture of a

barque making extremely bad weather of it, three miles or so distant.

Turning from the dismal scene, I tried the door, to find, as I had expected, that it was locked. It was evident from this that though a decided change had come over my affairs, I was still a prisoner. The situation was both dispiriting and perplexing; my head, however, ached too much to allow me to worry over it for very long. I accordingly climbed back into my bunk and composed myself for sleep once more. Success must have crowned my efforts, for when I woke again, the comparative steadiness of the vessel convinced me that the weather had taken a turn for the better. From a ray of sunlight that danced in and out through the port-hole, it was plain that clouds, which had hitherto covered the sky, had disappeared, and that there were hopes of better weather. My headache had almost left me, and I felt that if I could procure something to eat I should be almost myself once more. On looking at my watch I found to my annoyance that it had stopped at five minutes to six, so that I was unable to tell what the hour was. Once more

I climbed out of the bunk, and this time seated myself upon the settee.

I had not been there many minutes before the sound of voices reached my ears. The speakers were in the saloon, so I gathered, and one of the voices sounded strangely familiar to me. I tried to locate it, but for a time was unable to do so. Then in a flash it occurred to me, and I wondered that I had not recognised it before. It was the voice of Senor Sargasta, the Countess's father, or at any rate her reputed father.

"I am still in their clutches," I said to myself, with something that was very like despair, as I realised the meaning of this new discovery, "but how on earth did they get me aboard this boat, and what are they going to do with me now that they have got me here?"

The question was beyond me, however. I was compelled to leave it unanswered.

A few seconds later I heard the sound of footsteps approaching my cabin. Then the door was unlocked and opened, and the grey-haired, military-looking man, who had driven up with the Countess to the hotel

in Paris, and who had been introduced to London society as her parent, entered the cabin. Behind him was the young Count Conrad, with the same supercilious smile upon his face.

"Good-morning, my dear Sir George," said the elder man, with one of his extraordinary bows. "I am rejoiced to find that your adventure of last night has had no ill effect upon you. Allow me to offer you a hearty welcome to this gallant vessel. I fear that she has not behaved herself altogether as she might have done since you have been on board, but the North Sea is at the best of times a discourteous host."

"So I am in the North Sea, am I?" said I to myself, as I registered that piece of information in my mind. Then I continued aloud, "You have played me a scurvy trick between you, and one that, if I ever get out of this, will be likely to cause you a considerable amount of trouble."

The smile widened on Conrad's face. Evidently he thought the possibility of my regaining my freedom was a very remote one.

"I am desolated to think that we should have so much inconvenienced you," Sargasta replied. "But, alas, we had no option. However, we must do our best to make your stay with us as pleasant as is compatible with the circumstances. Doubtless you are hungry after your long fast. If so, will you permit me to conduct you to the saloon, where you will find that a meal has been prepared for you."

"You give me my liberty on board, then?" I said, with some surprise.

"Since we are clear of the coast, and provided of course that you do not abuse it, we will do so to a certain extent," he replied. "Should you give us a cause to regret our decision, nothing will remain but for us to confine you to your cabin once more. Pray let me lead the way."

With a feeling of vague bewilderment, almost impossible to describe, I followed them into the saloon, where I discovered, as he had said, that a meal had been arranged for me. In spite of my sorry position, I found that I possessed an excellent appetite and, in order that they might

not think that they had overawed me, I fell to work upon the joint before me with an avidity that I flatter myself considerably surprised them. Meanwhile the steamer rolled incessantly, until it looked as if even the fiddles upon the table would be unable to keep my plate and glass in position. Fortunately, I am an excellent sailor, otherwise I am doubtful whether I should have been able to continue my meal. During its progress the older man had seated himself near me, as if to make sure that I did not cut my throat, or do myself any other mischief with the knife I held in my hand. When I had finished he pointed to the deck above.

"Perhaps you would like to take a little fresh air," he shouted politely, for the noise below was such that we could scarcely make each other hear. "If so, permit me to be your escort."

In reply, I bowed and followed him along the saloon to the small companion ladder which led to the deck above. It was a fine scene that met our gaze as we opened the door and stepped out. I have already said that the violence of the gale had abated somewhat,

but there was still a sufficiently high sea running, to make it difficult to retain one's footing without holding on to something. After the stuffiness of my cabin, however, the pure air was vastly refreshing. As I stood in the hatch I took stock of the vessel. She could not have been more than fifteen hundred tons, and was as ancient a tub as could be safely trusted to put to sea. She was the possessor of an old-fashioned poop, from which two brass-railed ladders led down on either side to the deck below. On the small bridge forrard I could catch a glimpse of the officer of the watch, pacing to and fro, but at the distance I was from him, it was impossible to say whether I was acquainted with him or not.

"Let us walk aft," bellowed the old gentleman in my ear.

I accordingly turned and staggered with him as far as the taffrail, then forward again to the sheltered side of the deck. Here a surprise, to which my discovery of the Countess in that suburban house was as nothing, was in store for me. You will realize what I mean when I say that, comfortably stretched

out on deck-chairs on the lee side of the hatch were three men, who one and all uttered exclamations of astonishment on seeing me. As for me, I stood clutching the rails, and staring at them as if they were spirits from the grave come to mock at me. The man nearest to me was none other than the Commander-in-Chief, who had disappeared so mysteriously from Lord Beckingdale's residence on the night before the Aldershot review; next to him, with a rough sou'wester tied under his chin, was the Honourable Benjamin Castellan, Secretary of State for the Colonies, who had vanished shortly after I had said good-night to him in Cockspur Street, and whom I had thought never to see again; while furthest from me, and nearest the poop ladder, a stubby grey beard covering his usually well-shaven chin, was my old friend, General Woller, who had apparently been caught up into space at Paddington Station, after his return from audience at Windsor. The Colonial Secretary was the first to speak.

"Good Heavens, Manderville," he shouted, "is it you, or your ghost?"

"It is I, Manderville," I answered, as if

the assertion were necessary. "But you—we thought you were dead. How in the name of all that's wonderful, did you get here?"

By this time they were all on their feet, holding on to the rail of the hatch by one hand, shaking my hand by the other.

"That's too long a story to tell you now," said the Commander-in-Chief. "The question is, how did *you* get here?"

I could furnish them with no answer to that question, but referred them to the men who had kidnapped me. Meanwhile, the old Italian stood a few paces away, holding on to the rail and watching us. Even by this time I had not recovered from my surprise. In London we had all looked upon them as dead men, and now to find them my companions on a small steamer on the high seas, was almost too great a surprise.

"It seems beyond belief to find you here," I said, as we made our way back to the shelter of the companion hatch, where there was comparative silence. "The almost universal belief in England is that you have been murdered by Anarchists."

"We might as well have been," Woller

replied gloomily. "Until Castellan came, I was alone upon this tub, and you can imagine the sort of life I led."

"I can imagine all sorts of things," I replied. "But I want to hear your story. The others have doubtless told you how completely your disappearance puzzled us, Woller? We traced you as far as Paddington, and then lost sight of you altogether. It was said that you had taken a cab in the station yard and had driven away in it, but no trace of the driver could ever be discovered, in spite of the large rewards we offered."

"No one saw me drive away from Paddington," he answered, "for the simple reason that I walked from the station. They must have mistaken me for some one else. The scheme which brought about my destruction was, I must admit, a singularly ingenious one, if there is any comfort to be derived from that fact, and yet it was simplicity itself. As you are aware, the train by which I left Windsor, after stopping at Slough, does not do so again, except for ticket collecting, until it reaches Paddington. I should here mention that before leaving London that morning for

Windsor, I had received a note from my old friend, Mrs Marchingham, who is a great invalid, and whose son is at the Front, asking me if I could possibly spare the time to call upon her in order to wish her good-bye. On receipt of her letter I telegraphed to her saying that I would make every endeavour to comply with her request. It would have been strange had I not, for we had been playfellows as children, and had always been on the most affectionate terms."

"One moment," I said, for an idea had struck me. "If you telegraphed to her, how was it that the Department did not make us aware of the fact? We caused every enquiry to be made."

"Because I signed the telegram with my Christian name, and I am quite certain that no one recognised me at the Post-Office," he replied, and then continued his story.

"Well, as soon as I reached Paddington on my return from Windsor, I alighted from the train, and remembering that Exminster Terrace, where my old friend's residence is situated, is only a short distance from the station, I did not take a cab. On reaching the house, the front

door was opened to me by a neat maid-servant, who informed me that Mrs Marchingham was at home, and was expecting me. I accordingly followed her upstairs to the drawing-room where I waited, while the maid informed me that she would acquaint her mistress of my arrival. I might here explain that the drawing-room is a double one, and that the portion into which I was shown was at the back of the house, and overlooked the garden. The double doors were closed and heavy curtains draped either side of the window. Having no thought of treachery, I was standing beside the fire, waiting for my old friend to make her appearance, when two men suddenly emerged from behind the curtains, and pointed revolvers at me. One was the young Count Reiffenburg, cousin to the famous Countess de Venetza, of Wiltshire House, the other I had never seen before. In answer to my demands to be informed what their conduct meant, they told me that I was their prisoner, that Mrs Marchingham was abroad, and that they were her tenants for the time being. The letter I had received was a forgery. Had there been the least chance of escape, or had it been possible

for me to defy them, I should have done so, but one glance was sufficient to show me that the case was hopeless. That night I was drugged, and when I recovered my senses I found myself on board this vessel, though how I got here I cannot say. Such is the unvarnished record of my adventures."

Turning to the Colonial Secretary, I asked him to make me acquainted with his story.

"I am afraid that mine is rather more prosaic," he answered. "You will remember that on the night of my disappearance you and I walked together as far as Cockspur Street. There we stood talking upon the pavement for a short time, after which I wished you good-night and went down one of the side streets leading to Carlton House Terrace. I do not know whether you can recall the occurrence, but just before we bade each other good-night, an old woman passed us?"

I admitted that I remembered the fact, whereupon he continued:

"That old woman's presence in the passage had escaped my memory when I entered it. I had not advanced twenty paces, however, before I saw her turn and come towards me.

I was quite prepared for her to beg, and I was not disappointed. She implored me to give her a trifle in order that she might obtain a lodging for the night. Producing a coin, I was about to hand it to her, when something was slipped over my head from behind, and tightened round my neck. In such cases thought is quicker than action, and in a flash I realized that I was being garrotted. I have a vague recollection of being picked up and carried into a house close by, and then my senses left me and I remembered no more until I found myself on board this ship. My astonishment at finding Woller here to greet me may be better imagined than described. One night we came to anchor off the coast, though at what particular spot I cannot say, and next morning we discovered that the Commander-in-Chief had become one of our party. Now you had better ask him for his story."

I was about to do so when Sargasta who, as I have said, had all the time been standing near us, stated that it was time for us to return to our cabins. I wondered at the ready obedience that was given to his orders, but my wonderment did not last long,

when a man stepped from a spot alongside the mizzen-mast and I saw that he carried a rifle in his hand. We accordingly descended the companion ladder in single file, and once more entered the saloon. It was then that I discovered that two of our state cabins were on one side and two on the other, all of which when we were in them were kept securely locked.

When I was once more a prisoner in my cabin, I sat myself down upon the locker and endeavoured to appreciate my position. In whatever way one looked at it, it was far from being an enviable one. What our fate was to be it was difficult to see. Was it possible our captors intended to maroon us in some desolate region, or did they intend doing away with us altogether on the High Seas? In the latter case we should perish without a chance of helping ourselves, and our friends would remain in ignorance of our fate for ever. If we could only manage to communicate with the outside world, it might then be possible to capture the diabolical woman who was at the head of the affair. I felt that I could almost meet death complacently were I able

to bring about that happy circumstance. When I thought of all that had happened to me through her agency, I was nearly beside myself with contempt for having allowed myself to be so easily trapped.

So old-fashioned was the vessel that when darkness fell, instead of the electric light, an oil lamp was inserted in the receptacle outside the door. It had not been there very long before the door was unlocked, and a man whom I had not before seen, informed me that supper was upon the table. Eager to meet my comrades once more, I hastened into the saloon to find the Commander-in-Chief seated on one side of the table with Conrad beside him. I was invited to take my place on the other side, next to that occupied by Senor Sargasta. The violence of the sea had abated considerably, though the use of the fiddles had still to be retained. I looked about me for a sign of the Colonial Secretary and Woller, but as they were not present, I came to the conclusion that our gaolers were adopting, what must have struck them as being a very necessary precaution, namely, dividing our party into two portions. This

proved to be the case, for from that time forward, we were not permitted to take either our meals or our exercise together. The Commander-in-Chief and I were to be companions; the Colonial Secretary and Woller following suite. By this course the danger of any rising on our part was reduced by one half, while the strain of guarding us was not nearly so great.

During the progress of the meal, scarcely a word was spoken. We waited upon ourselves, and it was only when something that did not happen to be on the table was required, that the man who had called me to the meal made his appearance. After supper was over, we were informed that we might go on deck if we pleased, and, needless to say, we eagerly embraced the opportunity. Having donned our hats, we once more made our way to the companion ladder.

It was a brilliant moonlight night; scarcely a cloud was to be seen in the sky, while the wind and sea were abating every hour. Arm-in-arm we began to pace the deck, at the same time noticing the fact that the man with the rifle was as usual stationed near the poop-rail.

"It is evident that no precaution is to be omitted," said the Commander-in-Chief, with a bitter laugh. "I wonder what our friends in England would say if they could see us now?"

"I wonder what they would say," I replied, "if they knew who was at the bottom of it all? I suppose the Countess de Venetza is still giving her charming little dinners at Wiltshire House, and is still talking so regretfully of the losses England has sustained by reason of the disappearance of her prominent officials. Heaven send that Rotherhithe finds her out in time!"

"What do you mean?" my companion asked. "Why should he find her out?"

Then I remembered that Rotherhithe's engagement to the Countess had been announced since the Commander-in-Chief's disappearance, whereupon I made him acquainted with the facts of the case, and in doing so gave him a description of the dinner at Wiltshire House, which had been the preliminary to my capture.

"If we could only find some means of making the world aware of what we have discovered," he said, after a few moments' silence.

"That's what I was thinking this afternoon," I replied. "It appears to be impossible, however. If we were to throw a message overboard, it is a million to one against its being picked up or believed, while if we were in any way to attempt to attract the attention of a passing vessel, we should in all probability be dead men before they could come to our assistance."

"Be careful not to speak too loud," said my companion. "That fellow at the rail possesses sharp ears. You may be sure he will report anything he may regard as suspicious in our conversation or behaviour."

"By the way," I said, "I have not yet been told how your capture was effected. Had the man I saw in the wood, and whose presence I reported to Beckingdale, anything to do with it?"

"I am quite sure he had," was the reply. "In point of fact I incline to the belief that he was the ringleader in the whole affair. Taken altogether, it was not a very brilliant piece of work, and I have never ceased to be angry with myself for having been taken in so easily. But that is our general complaint.

In its simplicity, however, lay its greatest chance of success. I can see that now."

"My own affair was simple enough. Observe how it succeeded. Now give me the details."

"You shall have them. Doubtless you remember the fact that I was paying my first visit to Lord Beckingdale's new house. I had stayed at his old residence before it was burnt down, but had never been there since the restoration. That will be sufficient to account for my ignorance of its general plan. On the night of which I am speaking, I was located, as you will recollect, in the South Wing. Where Beckingdale's own quarters were I have no idea, and, as you may suppose, since then I have had no opportunity of finding out. I forget whether I mentioned the fact to you that I had brought a new man down with me. Poor old Simmons no longer felt equal to his work, and in consequence I had been compelled to engage a new man—a thing I hate doing. The fresh importation, however, seemed a very quiet and respectable fellow, and he had just completed his first month's service with me, when my visit to

Aldershot was arranged. On the evening in question I was tired, and dismissed him as quickly as possible. I don't think my head had been upon the pillow for more than five minutes before I was fast asleep. How long I slept I have no idea, I only know that I suddenly awoke to find my servant standing beside my bed, looking as if he himself had been hastily aroused from sleep.

"'What is it?' I asked as soon as I was able to say anything. 'What brings you here at this hour of the night?'

"'A message from his Lordship, sir,' the man replied in a low voice. 'His servant called me up to come and tell you that his Lordship would be glad if you would go to him as soon as possible in his study. A messenger has arrived from London with most serious intelligence. The other gentlemen have been roused, and his Lordship begs that you will not lose a moment in joining them. He would ask you to be as quiet as possible, in order that the ladies may not be alarmed.'

"'Have you any idea what the news is?' I enquired, as I got out of bed, for I thought it was just possible that Beckingdale's servant

might have said something to him when giving him the message.

"'No, sir,' he replied; 'I have no notion, except that it is very serious. His Lordship's man, sir, went so far as to say that all London is in an uproar.'

"Without more ado I sprang from my bed and commenced dressing. In a very few minutes I was sufficiently presentable to proceed on my errand.

"'Where did you say Lord Beckingdale is?' I asked, as we prepared to leave the room.

"'In his study, sir,' the man replied. 'If you will allow me I will take you to him.'

"Bidding him step quietly so that the rest of the household should not be disturbed, I followed him from the room, and down the passage in the direction of the hall. A faint glimmer of light illumined the passage, so that we were able to make our way along it without the assistance of a lamp or candle. Having reached the gallery, my man did not descend by the stairs to the hall below, but branched off down a side passage into a portion of the house I had not yet penetrated. Having passed along another corridor, we ap-

proached a door before which he paused. Still with the utmost respect, he opened it very quietly, and bowed as if for me to enter. Never for a moment suspecting such a thing as treachery, I did so, and, a moment later, had received a blow on the head, and was lying upon the floor, insensible. I can leave you, Manderville, to estimate the daring of the trick that had been played upon me. I have no doubt that it was with the deliberate intention of taking part in it that that wretched valet had entered my service. Little did I think, when I congratulated myself upon having secured him, that he was ultimately to bring about my ruin."

"But do you mean to tell me that, while we were all asleep, the very man whom I had seen watching the house from the plantation, and against whom I had warned Beckingdale, had entered it and taken possession of one of the rooms, in order to kidnap his most important guest?"

"I do mean it," he replied. "Improbable, impossible, though it may appear, it was certainly the case."

"And what happened to you afterwards?

Remember the house was guarded by the police, and that, as soon as your disappearance was made known, the country for miles around was scoured in search of you."

"It was not of the least use, for I did not leave the place until two days later," he replied. "As a matter of fact, for more than forty-eight hours I lay concealed, wishing myself dead, between the roof and the ceiling of that quaint old summer-house on the little knoll at the further end of the lake. How they got me there I cannot say, but that I was there and was prevented from making my presence known, even though my friends searched the room below for me, is as true as I am talking to you now. Then, when the search must have lost some of its energy, I was brought down in the dead of the night, carried through the wood, and placed in a conveyance of some sort, which immediately drove away with me. Shortly before daybreak we arrived at a house standing a good distance back from the road. From what I could see of it, it was a ramshackle old place, but the man who owned it, or at any rate the individual who came out to meet

us, seemed to be on familiar terms with my guards. He helped them to escort me into the house, and, if I am not mistaken, he himself locked the door of the small room in which I was to be confined for the next twenty hours. At the end of that time, still powerless to help myself, I was once more brought downstairs and placed in the cart. Again we drove off, and, for six hours, I suffered every imaginable torture. My hands and feet were tightly bound, and my mouth was secured so that I could not utter a cry for help. The cords used lacerated my wrists and ankles, while my head ached from the violence of the blow it had received on the night of my abduction. At last the cart stopped, and one of the men sprang out. A voice asked a question in Italian, then there was the sound of some one moving away, after which not a word was spoken for upwards of half-an-hour. At the end of that time the man who had absented himself returned and said in English, "It is all right." An interval of whispering followed, and then I was lifted out and placed upon the ground.

"'Not a word as you value your life,' said a voice, which I recognised as belonging to Count

Reiffenburg. 'If you speak, you're a dead man.'

"Another man took his place beside me and we entered a small field, crossed it, and then passed through a thick pine wood, which in its turn led up to some sandhills, whence we could see the moonlit waters of the Bay. A fishing-boat was being put out, and towards it my captors hurried me. Where the place was or whither they were taking me, I could not imagine, nor did I dare to offer any expostulation. I merely took my seat in the boat and waited to see what would happen. A quarter of an hour or so later, under the influence of a steady breeze, we were outside the Bay, making for the open sea. As the sun was in the act of rising, we saw a steamer heading in our direction. It proved to be this vessel, and when we were alongside, I was immediately transferred to her, Reiffenburg returning to the shore. You must picture for yourself my surprise at finding Woller and Castellan aboard her. Now you know my story. If any one had told me a month ago that I should figure in such an affair, I should not have believed them."

"Another illustration of the old saying

that the unexpected always happens," I replied.

"If we are fortunate enough to see our friends again, we shall have some extraordinary stories to tell," said the Commander-in-Chief. "The question is, however, shall we ever see them again?"

"That remains to be proved," I answered. "We must put our wits to work to see what can be done."

The words had scarcely left my lips, before young Reiffenburg appeared upon the scene and abruptly informed us that our promenade was at an end, and that it behoved us to return to our cabins, in order that our companions, who had just finished their meal, might take our places. We followed his instructions, and made our way slowly to the saloon below, half hoping that we should have a chance of exchanging a few words with our friends. They were not there, however, having been ordered to their cabins so that we should not meet. There was nothing for it, therefore, but to bid each other good-night, and to retire to our respective state-rooms with as good grace as possible.

Next morning, after breakfast, we were allowed on deck again for an hour, also after luncheon, and again in the evening. During the progress of the latter meal I was struck by the expression on the Commander-in-Chief's face. It was as if he were suffering from a severe attack of suppressed excitement. He fidgeted uneasily in his seat, and seemed to experience great difficulty in eating the food set before him. This excitement found vent while we were in the companion ladder on our way to the deck above. Half-way up he took me by the arm and said in a hoarse whisper—

"My God! Manderville, quite by chance to-day, I have discovered the most diabolical plot ever hatched by mortal man."

"Then be careful," I returned, "that they do not suspect you of knowing it. Wait until we are safely out of ear-shot before you say anything to me on the subject."

When we reached the deck we found the sentry on guard as usual. We accordingly walked aft, and had paced the poop two or three times before I would permit the Commander-in-Chief to unfold his tale. Then leaning upon the taffrail,

and looking at the white streak of our wake, I asked him what he had discovered.

"The most villainous plot, imaginable," he replied. "You will remember that Reiffenburg left the saloon before we had finished luncheon this afternoon, and that I was the first to go up on deck. You will also recall the fact that the fellow with the rifle kept close to us while we were on deck, so that it was impossible for me to tell you what I had heard. On reaching the top of the companion, I found Reiffenburg and the dark man who acts as steward, and yet who seems to be on such familiar terms with them, in close conversation beside the door."

"What were they talking about?"

"Even now I can only hazard a conjecture," he answered. "What I heard Reiffenburg say was this, word for word: '*Fully wound up she will run for an hour. Then will come the explosion. Sixty minutes exactly after it has been placed in the stokehole, it will blow the bottom out, and she will go down like a stone.*' On hearing this the other paused for a moment, then he said:

"'When do you think it will be?'

"'*The day after to-morrow,*' Reiffenburg

replied. '*If all goes well, and she keeps to the arrangement, she should be in sight.*' When he had said this he strolled away towards the poop ladder, while the other took up his position, with his rifle, alongside the mizzen-mast, preparatory to our coming on deck."

CHAPTER X

FOR some minutes after the Commander-in-Chief had finished speaking, I stood staring down at the white whirl of water below me, wrapt in what I might term, for want of a better simile, an overwhelming bewilderment of terror. There could be no doubt that the construction he had placed upon what he had heard was a correct one. Yet it seemed beyond belief, as I reviewed it in my mind, that there could exist men in the world, so base, so callous, as to even contemplate putting such a scheme into execution. And yet, what other construction could we place upon it?

"Are you quite sure that you have told it to me exactly as you heard it?" I said, trying to speak calmly. "As you are aware, the mere substitution of one word for another, or the change of a sentence, might make all the difference."

"Oh no," he said, "I am absolutely certain that I have repeated the conversation word for word as I heard it. In fact, I should be prepared to stake my life upon it."

"Very well. Now let us look at the matter from every point of view. You say that Reiffenburg asserted that a certain something, when fully wound up, would run for an hour. Is that not so?"

The Commander-in-Chief nodded.

"In that case," I continued, "we may believe ourselves to be right if we describe that something as a clock-work machine. We may also be sure that if the explosion to which he referred is to take place, it will be when the machine has run for the allotted time. In other words, it is an anarchist bomb, of superior construction and capable of being set, like an alarum clock, to go off at a given time. The mere fact that it is to be placed in the stoke-hole, shows that it is to be used on board a steamer, and it is scarcely likely to be on any other than this boat. Putting all these things together, we arrive at this conclusion: The day after to-morrow another vessel is due to join us. Our captors

and the crew of this boat will leave her and go aboard the new-comer, having previously set the machine going, and——"

"And we shall be left locked in our cabins to drown like rats in a trap!" said my companion in an awed whisper.

"That, I take it, is the idea," I answered slowly.

"My God! Manderville, how can you speak so quietly. Don't you realise what an awful position we are placed in?"

"I realize it perfectly," I answered. "I am trying to think what we can do to save ourselves."

The situation was so terrible that for a few moments I stood looking across the waste of water, seeing nothing but a man locked in his cabin, knowing that the ship was sinking, and battling vainly for life. "The day after to-morrow! The day after to-morrow!" The words rang in my brain like the tolling of a funeral knell.

"Surely there must be a way out of it if we can only find it," I said—"some manner in which we can thwart these murderous ruffians. Let us put our wits to work with all speed,

and see whether or not we can find a loophole of escape."

"I have been doing that all the afternoon," the Commander-in-Chief replied, "but so far without any success. If we are locked in our cabins, I don't see how it will be possible for us to do anything. A mouse confined in a trap, when a servant-girl plunges it into a bucket of water, is not more helpless than we shall be."

"Come, come, old friend," I said, "you must not give way like that."

"I don't think any man can accuse me of cowardice," he replied, "but I must confess that when I think of what may happen the day after to-morrow, my courage fails me."

"But it's not going to happen," I answered. "Make up your mind to that. As I said just now, there must be a way out of it, and we've got to find it. In the meantime, we must endeavour, if possible, to let the others know the position of affairs, though how that's to be managed, I must confess I don't quite see. It is not possible to approach their cabins, and, according to

the new arrangement, we are not allowed to come into personal contact with them."

"Could it not be managed by means of the port-holes?" my companion enquired. "Your cabin and that occupied by Castellan adjoin, I believe?"

"That is so," I replied, "but I could not reach a quarter of the distance that separates his port-hole from mine, and I have nothing in my cabin to assist me. But we must think it over and see what can be done. Now we had better begin to pace the deck again, or they may grow suspicious."

With that we set out, and for upwards of an hour religiously patrolled the poop. At the end of that time we were ordered below, and when my cabin door was locked upon me, I sat myself down on my locker and put my brains to work. The first point to be decided, as I have said above, was how we were to communicate with the others; the second and all important, was to find a means of escape from the doom that had been prepared for us. At last, my head in a whirl, I turned into bed and endeavoured to divert my mind from the burden it carried.

The attempt was useless, however, as may be easily understood. Think of what I would, my thoughts invariably came back to the same subject. I recalled that night in Paris, when the eyes of the woman we had known as the Countess de Venetza had exercised such a strange effect upon me. I remembered the nameless horror they had inspired in me, and the sleepless nights I had had in consequence. I also recalled our first meeting and our crossing to London together. Who would have dreamt then that that meeting would have ended in this terrible fashion?

Hour by hour the night wore on until the faint, weird light of dawn crept into the sky. We might now say that *to-morrow* we should know our fate. Then, tired of tumbling and tossing in my bunk, I left it, and stood at the open port-hole, watching the great, grey waves go by. There was a fair sea running, and, in consequence, the steamer was rolling heavily.

"If only I could find some means of communicating with Castellan," I said to myself for the hundredth time. "He and Woller might put their wits to work, and

possibly hit upon a scheme that would save us." Then, in a flash, as is generally the way, an idea occurred to me. If I were permitted a chance of carrying it out, it was quite within the bounds of possibility that it might succeed.

Taking my letter-case from my pocket, I selected a clean half-sheet of note-paper, and wrote upon it a letter to the Colonial Secretary. In it I told him what the Commander-in-Chief had discovered, and what our suspicions were. I begged him to tell Woller, and between them to try and think out a scheme for our deliverance. When I had finished, I made the note into a cocked hat and slipped it into my pocket. I might here remark, that the doors of the various cabins opened directly into the saloon, and that at the foot of each door there was the space of nearly an inch. My object, therefore, was to get the note under the door without our gaolers observing what I was doing. At first glance this would appear a difficult matter to accomplish, but I had every confidence in my plan, and was determined to make the

attempt. As good fortune had it, Castellan's cabin was almost directly behind my seat in the saloon, and this was a point in my favour. Having settled upon an idea for delivering this note, I was in a fever to put it into execution. It seemed as if the breakfast hour would never arrive, but at last the door was unlocked, and I was informed that the meal was upon the table. Now or never must my scheme be carried out.

As I have said, the ship was rolling heavily, and for this reason I clutched at the rail running along the side of the saloon, while with my left I made a feint of reaching the back of the seat at the table. Then, abandoning the rail, I staggered forward, just as the ship was finishing her downward roll. The natural consequence was that I lost my footing as she came up again, and found myself lying in a heap upon the floor of the saloon, just before Castellan's cabin. While in this position, it was quite easy to push the note underneath the door without attracting attention. This accomplished, I staggered to my feet and to my position at the table, flattering myself that the whole thing had been so natural that the

suspicions of our captors could not possibly have been aroused. Our meal at an end, I followed the Commander-in-Chief to the deck above.

"Well," I said, when we reached the taffrail, "have you anything to tell me?"

"Nothing," he answered lugubriously. "I lay awake all night puzzling my brains, but without success. If only we could communicate with Castellan, I feel sure he would be able to work out some scheme."

"It is already done," I replied. "I managed to get a note to him this morning."

"You did," he said, with a look of incredulity upon his face. "Then how on earth did you manage it?"

"By giving myself a bump which I shall remember for some hours to come," I replied. "You observed the fall I had in the saloon, when trying to reach the breakfast-table?"

"Yes, I noticed it," he answered; "but what had that to do with it?"

"Everything in the world," I said. "Perhaps it did not strike you that my fall took place outside Castellan's cabin door. That was when I got the note to him. If you did not see it,

it is more than probable that the others did not. In that case, we need have no fears in that direction."

"There is the making of a strategist in you," he said, with the first smile upon his face I had seen there since he told me his dreadful news.

"Many thanks. Now the next thing to consider is, how is Castellan to reply."

"He'll find a way," my companion replied. "Never fear, Castellan is a resourceful man, and all I hope is that he'll find a way of getting us out of this hole. If we could only manage to get out of our cabins, there might be some chance for us, but so far as I can see, there is not the slightest possibility of being able to do that. What is more to the point, did you observe that they are making assurance doubly sure by putting a padlock on each cabin door?"

"No, I did not notice it," I replied. "How do you know it?"

"Because the carpenter was at work on my door before breakfast," he answered.

If this were so, our case was indeed hopeless, for while we might be able to force the lock, it would be impossible to

break through both lock and staple. When we returned to the saloon, I found that what my companion had said was only too true. The man had placed the necessary fittings on each of my friends' cabin doors, and was just commencing on mine. He stood aside to let me pass, and as he did so, I noticed that behind the flap of his tool basket, and less than a couple of inches from the door, lay a small gimlet, which doubtless he had been using for the work he had been engaged upon. As I saw it, a longing to possess it, such as I never had for anything in my life, came over me. If only I could get it into the cabin unobserved, it would be worth more to me than a hundred times its weight in gold. Was it possible, however, to secure it? I had only a second in which to hit upon a scheme, but that was sufficient. Putting my hand to my waistcoat, I gave a tug at the cord which carried my eye-glass. It snapped and the glass rolled away across the floor towards the spot where the man was standing. He stooped to pick it up, but before he had time to stand upright again, I had given the gimlet a push with my foot, and it was inside the

cabin. When the man returned the glass to me, I gave him a coin for his trouble, thanked him, and then walked into my cabin and shut the door. Once that was closed behind me, I picked up my treasure and thrust it under the mattress of my bunk. The question the next few minutes would have to decide was whether the loss would be discovered, and if so, whether the man would accuse me of taking it. So invaluable would it be to me, that I felt as though I would have fought the world for its possession. I could plainly hear him driving in the last screws, and afterwards placing the tools he had been using in his basket with the others. A moment later the padlock was placed on the door and locked, and then my hearing told me that he was leaving the saloon. When all was safe, I took the gimlet from its hiding-place once more, and regarded it with an interest that, I can assure you, no article of that description had ever inspired in me before. Now, if only it were not discovered that I had it in my possession, I felt that I should be able to make my escape from the cabin when the proper time arrived.

When we went on deck after luncheon, I

informed the Commander-in-Chief of my good fortune, and of the use I intended putting it to. His delight was as sincere as my own, and we were about to discuss the possibilities it opened up for us, when I felt compelled to take off the yachting cap Reiffenburg had lent me on the morning after my arrival on board. Hitherto it had been tolerably comfortable, now it did not fit at all. A nasty lump was pressing upon my forehead, and in order to discover what occasioned it, I lifted the strip of leather inside, to find a piece of paper there that had certainly not been in the cap when I had last worn it. One second's consideration was sufficient to convince me that this was Castellan's method of conveying a message to me. He must have worn my cap when on deck, and have placed the strip of paper in a place where he knew I should be well-nigh certain to find it.

Leaning on the taffrail, with our backs turned to the sentry, I opened it and eagerly scanned the contents. It ran as follows :—

"DEAR MANDERVILLE,—Your letter astounded me. The plot you speak of only serves to show what a set of fiends we have fallen in with. Since

receiving it, I have been puzzling my brains for a solution of the difficulty, but so far have discovered no plan that could have the remotest prospect of success. As you will by this time have noticed, our enemies have taken double precautions to ensure our remaining prisoners. Unless we can manage to force our way out at the last moment, I fear that our fate is sealed. Should any idea occur to either of us, I will communicate with you again by the same means that I have employed on this occasion. God bless you both, and may He help us in our trouble.—Your friend, B. C."

When we had read it I tore it into small pieces and threw the fragments overboard. Half an hour later, when we went below, I wrote him a brief note in which I told him to be of good cheer, for I thought I had hit upon a scheme which might very possibly prove successful. This, when next we were on deck together, I placed in the hat, and on the following morning had the satisfaction of finding it gone.

Try, if you can, to imagine with what feelings we greeted the dawn of the day that was to mean so much for us. Who knew what the end of it would be? The mere idea was quite bad enough, but the uncertainty as to when the event we dreaded would take place

was much worse. It might not be until towards evening, or it might be at any moment. I was well aware that to carry out the plan I had proposed to myself—namely, the boring holes with the gimlet round the lock and the hasp and staple that secured the padlock, would take a long time, and, if left until the last moment, would be useless. On the other hand, for all our sakes, I dared not begin the work while there was even the remotest chance of our enemies discovering it. I was not afraid of their looking behind the door, for the simple reason that when I was out of the cabin, it was invariably hitched back, by means of a brass catch, to the end of the bunk—and there would be no reason for them to examine it. Yet if the point of the gimlet should chance to penetrate the smooth surface round the lock on the other side, detection would be certain, and the plot would fail by reason of it. Therefore, when we returned from our morning spell on deck, I embraced a momentary opportunity that presented itself, and measured the exact thickness of the door. Then when the latter was closed upon me and I was alone, I was able to mark the gimlet to

correspond. Having allowed a sufficient margin to ensure the point not going quite through the door, I mapped out my plan of operations, and set to work. The gimlet was not a large one, nor was its point particularly sharp. The labour was therefore prodigious; the tiny box-handle cut and blistered my hand, my face streamed with perspiration, but still I worked on and on, remembering always that not only my own life, but the lives of my companions, depended upon my exertions. By mid-day more than three-parts of the work was accomplished. As a memento of the occasion, large blisters covered the palm of my hand, while every muscle of my arm ached as if I had been placed upon the rack. That no suspicions should be aroused, I removed every particle of sawdust from the floor, and dropped it out of the port-hole, to be carried away by the breeze. By the time I was summoned to the luncheon only some twenty holes remained, and these I resolved to complete as soon as we returned from our airing on deck.

During the progress of the meal, it was easily to be seen that something unusual was going on. Our guards were unmistakably

excited, and I will do the older man, Sargasta, the credit of saying that he appeared sufficiently alive to his own villainy to have no desire for conversation with either the Commander-in-Chief or myself. Conrad, on the other hand, was even more flippant than usual. I noticed also that both men watched the deck uneasily, as though they were momentarily expecting news from that quarter. If this were so, they were destined to be disappointed, for the meal ended as uneventfully as it had begun.

According to custom, we had left our chairs and were proceeding to the door at the further end of the saloon, in order to take our usual promenade, when a hail reached us from the deck above. Conrad's face—he was standing in front of us at the time—turned as pale as the cloth upon the table, and when he ordered us back to our cabins, a second or so later, it was in a voice so unlike his own that I scarcely recognised it. As for myself, a sudden, and peculiar, feeling of composure had come over me. I felt sure the vessel they were expecting was in sight, and that in a short time they would be on their way to board her, leaving us to meet, with what fortitude we

might, the miserable death they had arranged for us.

To have let them have the least suspicion that we were aware of what they were about to do, would have been madness on our part, for in that case they would either have killed us outright, or have taken the precaution of making our cabins so secure, that we could not possibly escape from them in time. Once in my cabin I went to the port-hole and looked out. As I expected, I had interpreted the hail from deck aright, for, coming swiftly towards us, was a handsome vessel of the yacht type. Already, as I could tell from the revolutions of the screw, we had slackened our pace, and were doing but little more than crawl through the water. If we were to save ourselves we had not a moment to lose. Going to the bunk and procuring my gimlet, I set about the completion of my task with feverish energy. The blisters in the palm of my hand burnt like fire, my arm still ached from its morning exertion, but I kept steadily on, remembering that every turn of the little point was bringing us one revolution nearer safety. Only pausing now and

again to look out of the port-hole, in order to note the vessel's progress, I continued the work until only some half-dozen holes were required to finish the task. In the saloon outside perfect silence reigned, and I could guess why—they were either preparing the machine, or making ready to leave the ship. It seemed to me that I could hear the ticking of the clock-work of the bomb. What if it were already in the stoke-hole, and had been running for half-an-hour? Another half-an-hour might elapse before I should be able to open the door. This thought sent the sweat of pure terror rolling down my face, and caused me to work with feverish haste. At last I could see the new-comer without moving from the door. She was still little more than a mile away, and was signalling our vessel. Overhead the tramp of feet was to be heard, followed by the whine of a rope running through a sheave. A moment later a boat was lowered, and lay for a moment in full view of my port-hole, before she disappeared.

By this time I had thrown caution to the winds, and was boring my holes right through the door, and out on the other side. I had

just finished the last but one, and was about to withdraw the gimlet, when, without warning, the frail shaft broke off near the handle, and the little instrument, which a moment before had been our connecting link with life, lay at my feet as useless as a straw. I gazed at it for a moment, and then threw the handle from me with a gesture of despair. If I had not already done enough to make the door yield, my work would be of no avail. Suddenly a voice from the deck above called through the skylight in the saloon, "Conrad."

"Well?" cried the voice of Reiffenburg in answer from his cabin on the port side; "what is it?"

"What are you about that you do not come? Don't you know that the time is half gone?"

On hearing this, I sank back upon the locker almost beside myself with terror. My suspicions were correct after all. *The machine had already been running for half-an-hour.* A few seconds later a light step sounded in the saloon and went clattering up the ladder. I waited a few moments, and then, with agonizing curiosity, got on to my feet and looked out of the port-hole once more. I was just in time

to see three boats leave the side, and push off in the direction of the stranger. Reiffenburg, Sargasta, and the man who had waited upon us, were in that nearest me; the rest were filled with the officers and crew. As they drew further away they looked back at our doomed vessel, while Reiffenburg, upon whose face I can quite imagine that devilish smile to be playing, took off his hat and waved it to us, as if in ironical farewell. Then I sprang off the locker, and, seizing the handle of the door, pulled with all my strength. To my horror it stood the test. I tried again, with the same result, and then fell back against the wash-hand-stand, hopeless, for the moment, to the very centre of my being. All the time a little voice within me was telling me that in the stoke-hole the wheels were going round remorselessly, ticking off the seconds that separated us from death. Not more than a couple of minutes could have elapsed since the men had deserted the ship, but to me they seemed like hours. Then, gathering all my strength together, for one great effort, I once more gave the door a terrific pull. This time I was more successful, for the wood cracked.

Another crash followed, the door gave way under the strain, and I found myself stretched on my back upon the floor. *I was free!*

Regaining my feet I did not hesitate. I had arranged the whole plan in my mind beforehand, and did not waste a second considering what should be done. Shouting to my companions that I would free them in a few minutes, I rushed along the saloon, down the little alleyway, past the steward's cabin, and so on to the main-deck. Before a man could have counted twenty I was standing among the polished wheels and rods of the engine-room. "Heaven send they remained true of their decision to place it in the stoke-hole," I said to myself as I descended the narrow ladder that led to the furnace-room below.

It is strange how, in moments of such awful mental anguish, the mind will revert from the matter in hand to some apparently trivial subject. On this occasion I remembered how, many years ago, the Chairman of a great Steamship Company had been kind enough to take me over one of their new vessels, and had shown me the engine-room and the stoke-hole below. How little I had thought then that my next visit to a similar

CLUTCHING IT IN MY ARMS.

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place would be in search of an infernal machine that was intended to take my life! Rung by rung I descended the ladder and at last found myself in the stoke-hole. The furnaces were still alight, the men not having taken the trouble to draw the fires. Their rakes and shovels lay just as where they had thrown them down, but not a trace of the object I was searching for could I discover. Like a madman I ran hither and thither, hunting high and low: indeed it was not until I was almost giving up the search in despair, and was going off to look elsewhere, that my diligence was rewarded. Then, in a corner, I made out a black object, in shape not unlike a large band-box. That it was the bomb there could be no doubt, for when I placed my ear to its side, I could distinctly hear the ticking of the clockwork within. Clutching it in my arms, regardless of what would happen should the allotted time expire while I was carrying it, I climbed the ladder, passed through the engine room, and into the alley beyond. A mist was clouding my eyes, my breath came in heavy gasps, but I heeded nothing save the necessity for getting that devilish contrivance overboard, and out of

harm's way. Reaching the bulwarks on the starboard side, that is to say, on the side opposite to that on which the strange vessel was lying, I raised it high above my head and threw it from me. It struck the water with a splash, a few bubbles followed it, and then it was gone. So far as that was concerned, we were saved.

Having thrown the machine overboard, I made my way to the saloon as quickly as possible. Much still remained to be done. I could imagine with what impatience my companions were awaiting my return; being in ignorance of what was going on, their anxiety must have been greater than mine. Hastening to the Captain's cabin on the port side, which during our term on board had been occupied by Sargasta, I flung open the door and hurried in, to find a scene of the wildest confusion. Clothes, papers, and books were strewn about the floor in hopeless disorder, but the articles which I had come in search of, the keys of my friends' cabin doors, also those of the padlocks, lay in a bunch before me upon the table. I picked them up and hastened into the saloon once more. In but little longer time than it takes to tell, the doors were opened, and they were at liberty.

"And the machine?" cried Castellan, while the others looked the question.

"Overboard," I answered. "I hastened to get it out of the way, before coming to relieve you."

"God bless you, Manderville," said Woller, taking my hand. "You have saved our lives!"

"There can be no doubt of that," put in the Commander-in-Chief. "And now, what is to be done?"

"We must get away from that boat over there," I answered. "Castellan, you have always had a liking for mechanics and engineering, do you think you could undertake the engines?"

"I think I could manage them at a pinch," he replied. "At anyrate, I am quite willing to try."

"And you?"

"I must go to the wheel," I answered. "Whatever happens, we must give that vessel yonder a run for her money. Now let us be off, but be sure to keep out of sight as you cross the deck. They'll be waiting and watching for the explosion."

"In that case, Heaven be thanked, they are doomed to disappointment," said Woller.

"Now, Castellan," I said, "if you can do us the favour of setting this crazy old tub going again, we shall be grateful." Then turning to Woller and the Commander-in-Chief, I added: "I am sure, gentlemen, you will, for once in your lives, condescend to officiate as stokers."

Both were quick to express their willingness to do all that lay in their power to help, and then we left the saloon and, keeping under cover of the bulwarks, made our way along the main deck to the midships of the vessel. In the alleyway at the entrance to the engine-room we paused for a moment, and Castellan held out his hand, which I took without a word. The others followed suit, and then I sped on towards the ladder leading to the bridge. Reaching the wheel-house in front of the chart-room, for I had no intention of going upon the bridge itself, I shouted down the tube to the engine-room, to know how soon it would be possible for them to put her ahead.

"I am starting her now," was the reply. "I

am afraid, however, that it will be some time before I can get much out of her."

True to his word, a moment later the vessel began to draw slowly ahead, but her speed was so slow as to be scarcely perceptible. As I stood at the wheel I wondered what they were doing on board the other vessel. Fully half-an-hour had elapsed since they had left the ship, and yet there had been no explosion. I could distinguish the boats lying alongside her, and could well imagine how puzzled their occupants must feel. Then a thought came into my mind which almost brought my heart into my mouth. What if they should suppose that something had gone wrong with the mechanism of the bomb, and should return to the vessel to make sure of our destruction by scuttling her themselves? Under the impulse of this new fear I applied my mouth to the speaking tube again.

"For Heaven's sake, get all the speed you can on her," I cried. "I am afraid of their coming back."

"We are doing our best," was the reply. "The pressure is rising steadily."

I prayed that it might rise in time to save

us, and turned my attention to the wheel once more. Then a sudden and very natural curiosity came over me to discover, if possible, our whereabouts on the seas. When I had first come on board they had talked about the North Sea, but I had now quite convinced myself that this was not the case. At the slow pace at which she was travelling, the vessel required little or no watching, so, leaving her to her own devices, I went out of the wheel-room by the starboard door, in order that I should not be observed by the people on board the other vessel, and so entered the old-fashioned chart-room. I quite expected to find the chart there with the run marked out upon it, and I was not disappointed. The navigator, whoever he was, must have been both a careful and conscientious man, for I found that he had pricked off his run up to mid-day. I found it very easy, therefore, to settle our position. It proved to be as I expected. We were not in the North Sea at all, and, so far as that chart was concerned, had never been there. Our true position was three degrees, or thereabouts, west of Achil Head, on the west coast of Ireland. I had just convinced myself on this

point, when I chanced to look out of the window on the port side. Almost before I had time to think, I was back in the wheel-room once more.

"The boats are returning," I shouted down the tube, in a voice that might have been heard a couple of hundred yards away, and then added illogically—"can you do nothing?"

I looked again, and sure enough two of the boats were heading directly for us. It was plain that they had noticed something suspicious, either from the smoke escaping from the funnel, or the splashing of the screw astern, otherwise they would not have deemed it necessary to send a second boat. They must have guessed that we had escaped from our cabins, and that we had taken charge of the ship.

For a moment a feeling of exultation seized me as I thought of the disappointment and rage which must be filling their hearts. The feeling, however, was short-lived. Let them once get aboard, I reflected (and I did not see how we were to prevent them), and the end, so far as we were concerned, would be the same as though the bomb I had thrown overboard had been allowed to do its deadly work. I looked

out again, to discover that the leading boat was now less than a quarter of a mile away; so close indeed was she that I could plainly see the men in her—the dark man, who had officiated as steward, in the bows, and Sargasta and Conrad in the stern. Every stroke of the oars was bringing her nearer, and already the man in the bows was getting his boat-hook ready to hitch on to the accommodation ladder. In another two or three minutes at most, they would have been aboard. Then in a voice which at any other time I should not have recognised for my own, I shouted down the tube—"For Heaven's sake, give her steam. They are close alongside." Then came back the answer I shall not forget as long as I live: "It's all right now, I can let her go."

I had scarcely withdrawn my ear from the tube before I felt a throb run through the vessel, and she was going ahead at a speed that could scarcely have been less than eight knots an hour. Throwing prudence to the winds, I ran out to the deck and looked at the boats, now lying motionless upon the water some considerable distance astern. One of the occu-

pants of the first boat was standing up watching us through a pair of glasses. Then, realizing that it was hopeless for them to think of catching us, the boat's head was turned, and they pulled back at a fast pace towards the yacht. That it would be necessary for the latter to remain in order to pick them up was quite certain, and in this lay our chance of obtaining a good start. Through the medium of the speaking-tube I shouted words of encouragement to the engine-room below. It needed only a glance over the side to be assured that our speed was materially increasing. If only we could manage to keep it up until nightfall, it was just possible we might manage to escape after all. At one time and another I have sailed many an exciting race, but never one for such a big stake as that we were now contesting. It was nearly five o'clock by this time, and the afternoon was rapidly drawing in. In half an hour it would be dark, then, if we were not overhauled and captured before, our opportunity would come. Kind, however, as Providence had so far been, even greater good fortune was still in store for us. I remember that I had just

called down to the engine-room to know if one of them could come up to me for a consultation. The Commander-in-Chief was selected, and it was not long before he made his appearance before me, collarless, with his shirt-sleeves rolled up, and begrimed from head to foot with coal-dust.

"Where is she?" he asked, as soon as he reached me.

In answer I led him to the door of the wheel-room and pointed astern.

"She has got the boats aboard, and will be after us in a few minutes," I said. "Let us hope that we shall be able to show them a good pair of heels. Can she do any more than her present running?"

"Not very much," my companion replied. "We are all inexperienced down below, you know. If you could see Castellan's face as I saw it just now, you would see the very picture of anxiety. He says he doesn't know at what moment he may turn a wrong handle and blow us to pieces."

"I trust he will not do so just yet," I answered. "Tell him we are all agreed that he is doing splendidly. And now let us see

how our friend, the enemy, is get—— Why, what's this? what's become of the yacht? I can't see her!"

We stood at the wheel-house door straining our eyes, but we could see no sign of the yacht. Providence had sent to our assistance one of those extraordinary fogs which spring up so quickly on the west coast of Ireland, and this was the stroke of Good Fortune to which I have already referred. A moment before the sea had been as open as a mill pond; now it was covered with an impenetrable blanket of mist.

"If we don't run into anything, or anything doesn't run into us, I fancy we shall be able to give her the slip, after all," I said. "Now the matter to be settled is the course we are to pursue. Shall we continue as we are going, that is to say, parallel with the coast, or shall we bring her head due west and make for the open sea?"

"There can be no doubt that under the present circumstances, the open sea is the right place for us," my companion replied. "The western coast line of Ireland is proverbially treacherous, and if this fog continues,

we ought to have plenty of sea-room about us."

"I agree with you. And the others, what do they say?"

"They are willing to fall in with anything we may decide," he answered.

"In that case, let us steer for the open sea," I said, and put the wheel over as I did so.

The vessel's head turned slowly round, and when I had got her into the position I wanted, I resigned the wheel to my companion, telling him to keep her as she was going, while I went into the next cabin to look at the chart. On examining it, I was relieved to find that, according to the course we were now steering, and the speed at which we were travelling, it would be all straightforward sailing for some hours to come.

By this time the vessel was encompassed in a white shroud, so that it was impossible to see more than a few yards ahead. As an example, I might remark that from the wheel-house even the foremast was invisible. Not a sound was to be heard save the throbbing of the engines and the dripping of the moisture

upon the deck. Nevertheless, regardless of consequences, we steamed steadily on, trusting to the good fortune which had followed us so far to keep any vessel out of our way.

When I returned to the wheel-room, the Commander-in-Chief left for below, promising, on his arrival there, to send Woller to the cuddy in search of food. The necessity for husbanding our strength, in view of the work we had before us, was apparent to all. That the General was successful in his search was proved by the fact that when he joined me a quarter of an hour later, he brought with him a bottle of claret, some excellent ham, and enough bread and cheese to have satisfied two men, with appetites bigger than my own. After he had left me, I lighted the lamps in the binnacle and then fell to work upon the food.

So far as that night is concerned there is little else to chronicle. Hour after hour, that is to say until ten o'clock, we continued our due westerly coast, and then left the fog behind us, as suddenly as it had overtaken us. Overhead the stars shone brilliantly, while the sea, save for the long Atlantic swell, was as smooth

as glass. Though I searched the waste of water as far as my eye could reach, not a sign of a vessel could be discovered. Having satisfied myself upon this point, I made the wheel secure and set off in search of the ship's lights. These I discovered in the forecastle, and when I had placed them in position I lighted them, and then returned to the wheel-room. I had not been there many minutes before the sound of a footstep on the deck outside attracted my attention, and a minute later Castellan stood before me. No one would have recognised in the figure he presented, the trim, well-dressed Colonial Secretary of a few months before.

"All well so far, Manderville," he said cheerily; "but I can tell you it's terribly anxious work below. I've just run up to obtain a breath of fresh air and to see what you are doing. I am afraid you must be very tired."

"Not more tired than you are, I expect," I answered. "I intend bringing her head round to south-west in a few minutes; that should put us in the track of ships by daylight. Our luck will have deserted us indeed, if we cannot find one and get them to take us aboard. Do you

think you can manage to hold out below until then?"

"We must," he replied; "there is nothing else for it. This has been a terrible day, Manderville. We ought to be thankful that we have come so well out of it."

"Hear, hear, to that," I answered.

"And now I must be getting back to the engine-room," he said. "Call through the tube if you want anything, won't you?"

I promised to do so, and then with another good wish, he bade me farewell and disappeared.

When he had gone I brought the vessel's head round to the course indicated, and then settled myself down to a long night's vigil. How wearying it was I must leave my readers to imagine. The night was bitterly cold, but I was so wrapt up in what I was doing, that I paid small heed to that. At regular intervals I left the wheel-room and went to the bridge above, to make sure that no vessel was in sight. Then I would return to my post and remain there for another quarter of an hour. It was wearying work, and more than once I was so nearly over-powered by sleep that it

became necessary for me to stamp my feet and pinch myself in order to keep awake. At last, after what seemed an eternity of waiting, the first signs of approaching day were to be observed in the sky. Then a faint grey light overspread the sea, touching the little waves until they had the appearance of frosted silver. When it was quite light I left the wheel and made my way up to the bridge. Still no sail was in sight, and for all I could see to the contrary, ours might have been the only vessel upon the ocean.

At seven o'clock, when I was beginning to feel faint for want of food, I spoke through the tube to Castellan, asking him to send one of his companions in search of a meal. He informed me that Woller would go immediately, and on hearing that I returned to my post. I had not been there many minutes, before I heard a shout outside, and Woller, excited beyond measure, made his appearance at the wheel-house door.

"A ship! a ship!" he cried. "A man-of-war, if I'm not mistaken, and not more than five miles away!"

Before he could say anything more I was out

on the deck beside him, holding on to the rail and watching a large black man-of-war coming up hand-over-hand. She was certainly not more than five miles distant, and every moment brought her nearer. Hastening to the engine-room tube, I called to Castellan to stop our vessel; then, asking Woller to take the wheel, I ran aft to the signal-locker in the companion hatch. To pick out the Union Jack and to bend it on the peak halyards occupied scarcely more time than it takes to tell. Then I ran it up to half-mast as a signal of distress, and having done so, went aft to the taffrail and waited for the other vessel to come up to us.

She made an imposing picture in the bright morning light as she came cleaving her way through the water, and when I remembered all that her coming meant to us, I could have kissed her very decks in thankfulness.

Returning to the bridge I found Castellan, the Commander-in-Chief, and Woller awaiting me there. Not a word passed between us for some moments. We stood gazing at the Queen's ship in silence, waiting to see what she would do. Then a stream

of signals broke out at her mast-head, but as it was impossible for us to interpret them without the necessary code, we were obliged to disregard them. She must have understood this, for she gradually drew closer until she was less than half a mile distant, when she came to a standstill.

Shortly after we distinctly heard a boat piped away, saw it leave her side, and watched it come towards us. A large lump was steadily rising in my throat as I saw the blue-jackets at the oars and the officer seated in the stern, and I felt that I was getting perilously near making a fool of myself. Churning the water under her bows into snow-white foam, the boat drew alongside. Then the handsome young officer ascended the accommodation ladder. We had by this time descended to the main deck to receive him. That he did not recognise us (and he might very well not have done so) was evident from the fashion in which he addressed us.

"Well, my men," he began, glancing from one to the other of us, as if to satisfy himself as to which was the leader, "what is the meaning of your distress signals? From what

I can see of her, your boat looks right enough."

"There is no fault to be found with the boat," I answered, realizing in an instant the position of affairs. "The truth is, we want to be taken off her. It is impossible to work her with only four men."

"But what has become of the rest of the crew?" he asked, looking round as if he expected to see them somewhere about.

"They left her yesterday," I answered, unable, despite the gravity of the situation, to refrain from mystifying him. The youth was so full of his own importance, and so inclined to be overbearing that I could not help myself.

"And pray what rank do you four hold on board her?" he asked, evidently not a little surprised by our appearances.

"We are passengers," said the Commander-in-Chief, "and, as my friend says, we are extremely anxious to leave the ship and go aboard your vessel."

"That's all very well," he answered curtly, "but I don't think it will do. The skipper wouldn't hear of it, don't you know. But for the present, what are your names?"

Here was the opportunity for which I had been waiting.

"This gentleman is the Right Honourable Benjamin Castellan, Secretary of State for the Colonies," I said, pointing to Castellan, "this is the Commander-in-Chief of the British Army, and my friend on your left is Sir William Woller, who some little time ago was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the British forces in South Africa."

"Stow that," the officer answered angrily. "You'd better not play the fool with me. What do you take me for?"

At the same time I noticed that he looked curiously from one to the other of us as if he could not altogether trust his own judgment. Then he added: "You know very well that the four gentlemen you speak of are dead."

"You will find, my friend, when you come to know us better, that there is likely to be a difference of opinion on that score," said the Commander-in-Chief quietly. "My own is that they are very much alive."

"Perhaps it would be as well for one of us to write a note to the Captain," Castellan put

in. Then turning to the lieutenant, he continued: "I think it would be better for you to believe our story, my friend. What you have been told, as you will admit when you have heard all we have to say, is quite correct. That we are the people in question I shall soon hope to convince you. Will you accompany us to the saloon, or do you prefer to remain here?"

He came with us to the cuddy, and when we had found paper and ink in the captain's stateroom, Castellan sat down and wrote a note to the commander of the ship. This was despatched by the boat that had brought the lieutenant, and in less than half-an-hour Captain Breatford was ascending the steps of the accommodation ladder. In the meantime we had made ourselves as presentable as possible, and had quite succeeded in convincing the lieutenant of the truth of our story. He was profuse in his apologies for his manner towards us, but we bade him think no more about it. He might very well have been forgiven for not having recognised us.

I must leave you to imagine the captain's surprise at finding us in such a strange posi-

tion. He prophesied a tremendous sensation in England when our story should become known.

"You are quite certain, I suppose, that it was off Achil Head that you parted company with the yacht?" he asked when he had heard our adventures.

"Quite certain," I replied. "But if you would care to convince yourself on that score, and will come with me to the chart-room, I will show you the chart worked out by the officer of the watch up to noon yesterday."

He did so, took certain notes, and then invited us to accompany him to the warship. The necessary officers and crew had already arrived to take possession of our own vessel, and when all was ready, we bade the old tub farewell. She had been the theatre of one of the most singular adventures of the Century, and, but for the fact of my having obtained possession of that gimlet, might now have been lying at the bottom of the ocean, with us locked up in her.

On board the man-of-war a consultation was held, and as a result the captain decided to set off at once in search of the mysterious yacht,

and afterwards to land us at a port whence we could easily reach London.

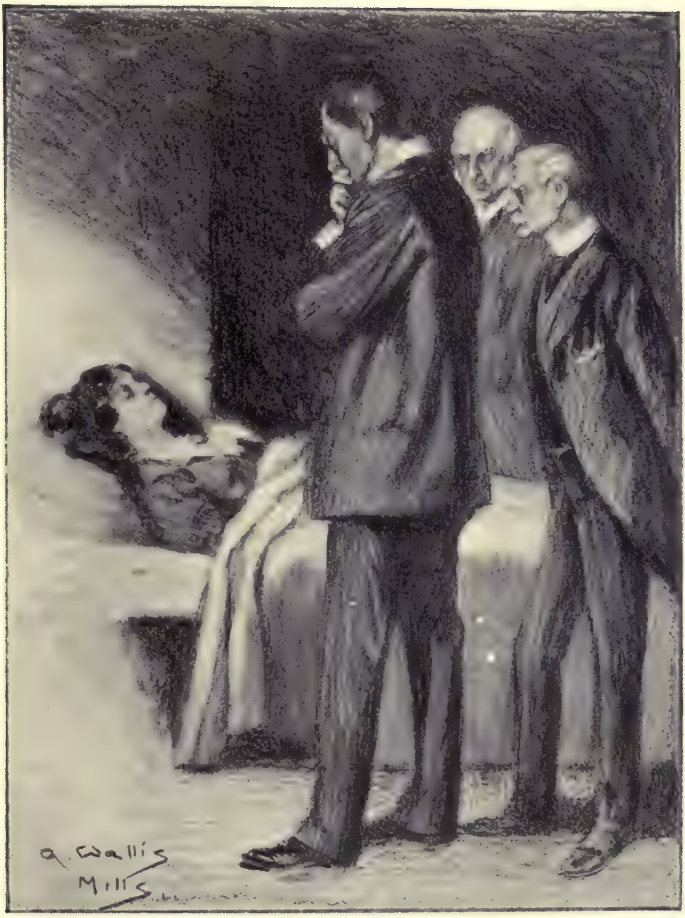
"In the meantime, gentlemen, permit me to offer you the best hospitality in my power," he said. "I think, in being permitted to rescue you, I should deem myself the most fortunate man in the British Navy to-day. To rescue four such gentlemen is not a chance that falls to a man's lot very often."

Needless to say we quite agreed with him.

CHAPTER XI

THE tale of our adventures has occupied a long time in the telling. There remains but little more to be added. What there is, however, I venture to think may be of interest to you.

According to the captain's arrangements, we explored the sea for a considerable distance round Achil Head, but without discovering any sign of the yacht. The peasantry, we learnt, had seen nothing of her, and it was not until we reached the little harbour of Gallisheen that we learnt how swift, and entirely unexpected, had been her fate. How it happened no one will ever know, though it is conjectured that the fog was responsible for the catastrophe. At any rate, the fact remains, that, when little more than eight miles from Gallisheen, she went ashore on that terrible coast, and in less than an hour became a total wreck.



I THINK WE ALL KNEW WHAT WE SHOULD SEE.

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You would be quite justified in asking how we knew that it was the same vessel. Let me explain. When we landed to make enquiries concerning the wreck, an old man informed us that only one body had been recovered, that of a woman. If we cared to inspect it, he added, it was at that moment lying in his cabin awaiting burial. Impelled by a feeling that was something more than curiosity, we entered the rough hut on the cliff. I think we all knew what we should see. When we came out into the sunlight again, Castellan, whose face was very pale, put his hand on my shoulder.

"Manderville, old friend," he said, "Shakespeare was right when he said that 'there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy.' That woman lying in the hut planned our ruin, and but for you she would have accomplished it. Now she is dead, while we are alive. There is a moral in it, if one cared to look for it."

"And Conrad, Sargasta, and the other man, what can have become of them?"

"Drowned, you may be sure," he answered, in the same curious voice. "Poor wretches! they have received their punishment sooner

than they expected. When all is said and done, we can afford to forgive them."

As he finished speaking we heard the snarl of the waves on the rocks below. They were telling their own tale, and I shuddered as I heard it.

. . . . . .

The outburst of excitement, the *furore*, I might say, which greeted our arrival in London will be well remembered by every one; for this reason it is not necessary for me to touch upon it here. How Woller completed his journey to the Cape after all, and the great things that he accomplished when he got there, are also known to every one.

I think it only right, however, in conclusion, to add that, in giving this record of our strange adventures to the public, I have done what I consider to be my duty; and with the hope that no public men will ever again be called upon to endure so much, I make my bow, and bid my readers a polite farewell.

THE END.

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